The Media, Democracy, and Spectacle: Critical Reflections

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A popular government without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy, or perhaps both.

—James Madison

A democratic society requires a separation of powers in which the media can serve as a check and balance against excessive power or corruption of the state and other major institutions, as well as to help to create informed citizens who can intelligently participate in public affairs. Sovereignty, in this framework, thus rests both in the constitutional order and with the will of the people. A free press was deemed vitally necessary to maintain a democratic society, and it is often claimed by champions of democracy that freedom of the press is one of the features that defines the superiority of democratic societies over competing social systems.

This concept of a free press was extended in the twentieth century to the broadcast media, which were assigned a series of democratic responsibilities. In countries like Britain, which developed a public service model of broadcasting, radio and then television were considered part of the public sector, with important duties to reproduce the national culture and provide forums of information and debate for citizens (Tracey 1998). Even in the United States, where a private industry model of broadcasting came to dominate, in the Federal Communications Act of 1934 and subsequent legislation and court decisions, broadcasting was to serve the “public interest, convenience, and necessity, ascribing certain democratic functions to the media,” until the setting aside of these strictures in the 1980s and 1990s.

In the era of intensifying globalization in the 1990s and into the new millennium, market models of broadcasting generally emerged as dominant in the neo-liberal world, and a series of global mergers took place that consolidated media ownership into ever fewer hands. The result has been that a shrinking number of giant corporations have controlled a widening range of media in corporate conglomerates that control the press, broadcasting, film, music, and other forms of popular entertainment, as well as the most accessed Internet and social networking sites.

Especially broadcasting media have been increasingly organized on a corporate business model, and competition between proliferating commercialized media have provided an impetus to replace news with entertainment, to generate a tabloidization of news, and to pursue profits and sensationalism rather than public enlightenment and democracy. Since the 1960s in the U.S., corporate control of broadcasting and the decline of television documentaries and public affairs programming has arguably helped to produce a less informed electorate, more susceptible to political manipulation. Democracy requires vigorous public debate of key issues of importance and an informed electorate, able to make intelligent decisions and to participate in politics. Corporate control of the media meant that corporations could use the media to aggressively promote their own interests and to cut back on the criticism of corporate abuses that were expanding from the 1970s to the present. The tabloidization of news and intense competition between various media meant that the corporate media ignored social problems and focused on scandal and tabloid entertainment rather than issues of serious public concern.

During the Clinton era (1992-2000), for instance, the media focused intensely on the O.J.
Simpson scandals in the mid-1990s and then turned toward the Clinton sex scandals (Kellner 2003). Although previously, corporate media tended to support presidents in office, and had been especially uncritical of the ruling administration in the Reagan and Bush Senior years, during the Clinton era the media became fierce watch dogs, pouncing on every potential scandal involving the Clintons and feasting on the sex scandals, which eventually became dominant in the mainstream corporate media in the 1990s. This was an era in the U.S. of right-wing talk radio, the rise of conservative television networks like Fox, and the proliferation of the Internet, which had many anti-Clinton activists and gossips like Matt Drudge, whose website first broke the Clinton sex scandals.5

During this era, media spectacle emerged as a dominant form in which news and information, politics, war, entertainment, sports, and scandals were presented to the public in the United States and then globally, which circulated through the matrix of old and new media and technologies.6 By “media spectacles” I am referring to media constructs that present events which disrupt ordinary and habitual flows of information, and that become popular stories which capture the attention of the media and the public. These media spectacles circulate through broadcasting networks, the Internet, social networking, cell phones, and other new media and communication technologies centering public attention on certain events. In a global networked society, media spectacles proliferate instantaneously, become virtual and viral, and in some cases become tools of socio-political control, while in other cases they can become instruments of opposition and political transformation, as well as mere moments of media hype and tabloidized sensationalism.

Dramatic news and events are presented as media spectacles and dominate certain news cycles. In the first decade of the 2000s, stories like the September 11, 2011 terror attacks, Hurricane Katrina, and Barack Obama and the 2008 U.S. presidential election were produced and distributed throughout the media and technoscape as media spectacles which were central events of their era in the United States. In 2011, the Arab Uprisings, the Libyan Revolution, the UK riots, the Occupy movements and the other major media spectacles engaged in my book Media Spectacle and Insurrection, 2011: From the Arab Uprisings to Occupy Everywhere, cascaded through broadcasting, print, and digital media, seizing people’s attention and emotions, and generating complex and multiple effects that may make 2011 as memorable a year in the history of social upheaval as 1968 and perhaps one as significant (Kellner 2012a).

The infrastructure of media spectacle that generates its proliferation was, initially, global cable and satellite television which emerged in the 1980s era of neoliberalism and deregulation, and increased media monopoly and competition between different media corporations and new media technologies. The period marks the rise of cable news networks that broadcast news 24/7 and used media spectacle to capture viewers. In the 1990s in the United States, new media and politicized forms of media spectacle proliferated, including Talk Radio, Fox News, and highly partisan Internet sites. Increasingly politicized mainstream media continue to heat up and expand today in the U.S., illustrated by the battles between Fox News on the Right and MSNBC and Current TV cable news channels on the Left, as well as within the Internet which has become a contested terrain used by left, right, and everyone in-between (Best and Kellner 2001; Kahn and Kellner 2003).

The 1990s in the U.S. thus exhibited the explosive rise of the Internet as well as contentious news cable channels and Talk Radio, providing new forms of political media spectacle that captured the attention of the general public. The 1990s was also an era in which media spectacle accelerated in the fields of sports, entertainment, fashion, and consumer culture, which were always a domain of the spectacle. In addition, the 1990s witnessed the spectacle of globalization and anti-
globalization movements, the global commodity spectacle such as the McDonald’s and Nike spectacle, NBA basketball, the World Cup, and other global sports spectacles (see Kellner 2003). This was also a period in which spectacle came to play an even greater role in Hollywood film during the blockbuster era, an aesthetic form appropriate for the neoliberal capital of the era which use spectacle to promote its goods, services, and the consumer society as a whole.

In the 2000s, blogs, wikis, Facebook, MySpace, and other new media and social networking sites, such as YouTube and Twitter, further proliferated the ubiquitous and omnipresent media matrix. Hence, the political economy and communications technology infrastructure of media spectacle have generated a proliferation of cable and satellite television, followed by the dramatic eruption of new technologies like the Internet, new media, and social networking. The Internet made it possible for everyone to voice opinions and to circulate news and information through ever-expanding new media and social network sites, in which Facebook, MySpace, iPhones and iPads, and other new technologies enable everyone to become part of the spectacle (if you can afford and know how to use the technology). Hence, today, everyone, from Hollywood and political celebrities to Internet activists in Egypt and Tunisia, or terrorists like al-Qaeda or deranged killers, can create their own media spectacles, or participate in the media spectacle of the day -- as the North African Arab Uprisings, European movements against global capital, and the Occupy movements demonstrated on a global scale in 2011 (see Kellner 2012a).

The epoch of neoliberalism in which media spectacle triumphed exhibited the rise of infotainment, with the implosion of news and entertainment (i.e. the O. J. Simpson trial, Clinton sex scandals, celebrity scandals and the like; see Kellner 2003). Fierce competition for ratings and advertising led information and news to become more visual and engaging, bringing codes of entertainment into journalism. News accordingly became more narrative and tabloid, with scandals and ever-multiplying segments on fashion, health, entertainment, and items of personal interest. In this media environment, hard politics and international news are now declining on the major U.S. television networks like ABC, CBS, and NBC, while the cable news networks are dominated by media spectacle and often partisan political talk shows.

The 1990s in the U.S. were an era of escalating social problems caused by globalization and the abuses of corporate capitalism, ecological crisis, decline in public health, growing inequality between rich and poor, and dangerous corporate practices that would eventually explode in 2002 in the Enron, WorldCom, and other corporate scandals, and in the 2008 global financial crisis. It was an era of neoliberalism in which not only were the broadcasting media deregulated, but so too were corporate practices, financial markets, and the global economy. The media tended to celebrate the "new economy" and the period of economic boom and growing affluence, but overlooked the dangers of an overinflated stock market, an unregulated economy, and the growing divisions between haves and have nots. During this era, the corporate media thus neglected social problems and social critique in favor of celebrating the capitalist economy and technological revolution. The media also overlooked the growth of terrorism, dangerous consequences of the growing division between the haves and the have-nots throughout the world, and escalating ecological problems (Kellner 2003).

Although the mainstream media in the United States tended to be largely uncritical of Reagan and Bush, they were attack dogs against Clinton and his administration in the 1990s (Alterman, 2003; Kellner 1990, 1992, 2001, and 2003a; Miller 2004). Thus, it was not surprising that during the 2000 election key sectors of the media would be highly critical of Democratic Party candidate Al Gore and give George W. Bush, son of the former president, an easy time (see Kellner 2001 and 2005, Chapter 1). During the Bush-Cheney administration, the corporate media tended to be lap
failing to investigate in any depth the scandals of Bush and Cheney, their bogus claims about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, and the destructive consequences of their domestic and foreign policies. Thus, the corporate media in the United States have largely abandoned their role as a “fourth estate” or *watch dogs*, investigating economic and political scandal and corruption in the public interest.

In the following sections, I will first document shifts in the political mediascape of the United States in the past fifteen years with the rise of partisan television networks and radio shows of the left and the right, along with new alternative media and social networking that provided a wide diversity of opinion and critique of the dominant political and corporate order. I then argue that this shift in the U.S. mediascape helped elect Barack Obama, which in turn intensified contestation within media politics. My writings on U.S. media and politics from the 1980s through the first years of the 2000s stressed how mainstream corporate media largely served the interests of the Republican Party within U.S. politics from the 1980s up to the Obama era, but now I would present the current U.S. mediascape as a highly contested terrain. Next, I indicate how Barack Obama used the media and media spectacle to successfully win the 2008 election, concluding with a discussion of how new and alternative media can help to promote genuine democratic debate and help disseminate the full range of information and ideas necessary to have a robustly democratic social order.

*The Rise of Partisan Corporate Broadcasting Programs and Networks and the Obama Era*

What is the role of a free and independent press in a democratic society? Is it to be a passive conduit responsible only for the delivery of information between a government and its people? Is it to aggressively print allegation and rumor independent of accuracy or fairness? Is it to show boobies? No. The role of a free press is to be the people’s eyes and ears, providing not just information but access, insight and, most importantly, context.

—*The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*

A democratic social order can best be maintained if the media in a country discuss issues of public concern and social problems from a variety of viewpoints and foster spirited public debate, accompanied by the development of vigorous and competent investigative and alternative media. The democratic imperative in the United States that the mainstream corporate press and broadcasting provide a variety of views on issues of public interest and controversy was increasingly sacrificed from the Reagan era of media deregulation through the Bush-Cheney era, as has their responsibility to serve as a check against excessive government or corporate power and corruption. As I have documented (Kellner 1990, 2001, 2003, 2005), there has been a crisis of democracy in the United States in part because the mainstream corporate media have been biased toward Republicans and conservatives over the past two decades. Mainstream corporate media tended to promote the interests of the corporations that own them, which tend to be pro-market and anti-regulation and have largely advanced the interests of corporate institutions and conservative politics.

I suggest that three convergent trends have seriously undermined U.S. democracy: the corporate control of mainstream media, which biases dominant media toward conservatism and profit; an implosion of information and entertainment and rise of a culture of media spectacle, which makes politics a form of entertainment and spectacle; and the rise of a right-wing Republican media propaganda and attack apparatus, which systematically deploys lies and deception to advance the agenda of conservative groups and interests.
An ever-growing right-wing Republican media machine, ranging from the *Wall Street Journal* and the conservative press to the Rupert Murdoch–owned Fox News, talk radio, and the extreme right sector on the Internet, all disseminate propaganda of a scope and virulence never before seen in U.S. history.\(^8\) Expanding significantly since the 1980s, the Republican propaganda machine has cultivated a group of ideological storm troopers who loudly support Republican party and conservative policies, and attack those who criticize them. These extremists are impervious to argument, ignore facts and analysis, and demonize as unpatriotic anyone who challenges Bush-Cheney policies. Groomed on Fox TV and right-wing talk radio, they verbally assaulted anyone who did not march in lockstep with the Bush/Cheney administration and waged ideological war against the heathens, liberals, feminists, gays and lesbians, and other dissenters. These ideological warriors allowed no disparagement of Bush and Cheney administration policies and refused civil dialogue, preferring denunciation and invective (see Brock 2004 and Brock, David, Rabin-Havt, and Media Matters 2012).

Although the mainstream corporate media are vilified as “liberal” by the right-wing attack machine, in fact, mainstream journalists have been easily intimidated when the right-wing army e-mails, calls, writes, and harasses any corporate media source that goes too far in criticizing the Bush-Cheney regime. The mainstream corporate media have been largely subservient to corporate interests, follow the sensation of the moment, and rarely engage in the sort of investigative journalism that was once the ideal and that now takes place largely in the alternative sphere. Corporate media increasingly promote entertainment over news and information, like the tabloids framed by codes of media spectacle (Kellner 2003 and 2005).

One interesting development within the corporate media in the U.S. during the 1990s, however, was the rise of competing partisan media broadcasting networks with the politicization of the liberal MSNBC TV news network as a counter-balance to the rightwing Fox News Network. In October 1996, Fox News joined CNN as a 24/7 news channel, but unlike CNN’s centrist approach, Fox was aggressively rightwing from the beginning. Owned by Rupert Murdoch and with former Nixon administration political operative and rightwing activist Roger Ailes as its President, Fox News provided a consistently pro-Republican and conservative perspective on the news, although it claimed it was “fair and balanced.” Against this claim, Robert Greenwald’s 2004 documentary film *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch’s War on Journalism* convincingly shows that Fox News has a strong conservative and pro-Republican Party bias, a critique supported by many books and scholarly articles.\(^9\)

MSNBC cable news TV network was founded as a spinoff from NBC news in a partnership with Microsoft in 1996, but during its first decade was not appreciably different from the centrist CNN, attempting to provide a balance of slightly left and rightwing hosts and commentary and punditry. Beginning in 2005, however, MSNBC added *Countdown With Keith Olbermann* who heavily satirized Fox News, and in particular his nemesis Bill O-Reilly, and put a liberal spin on his news presentations and discussion of contemporary politics. By 2007, Olbermann’s nightly attacks on the Bush-Cheney Gang were so savage, brilliantly satirical, and comprehensive that I abandoned my blog-left which had provided daily attacks on the Bush-Cheney regime from 2002-2007, but appears now to have disappeared from the Internet.

Olbermann was the “last angry man,” raging with nightly commentaries on the horrors of the day perpetrated by the Bush-Cheney Gang, and systematically criticizing their policies, while ridiculing media pundits and others who supported them. Almost all his guests shared his left-liberal views, and perhaps for the first time ever there was a nightly TV news show seriously critical of the Republican Party and the rightwing in the U.S. MSNBC’s nightly show *Hardball with*
Chris Matthews also began accelerating attacks on the Bush-Cheney administration and provided strong liberal commentary and critique.

Rachel Maddow, a political analyst, Air America Radio host, and Olbermann protégé, was given in 2008 The Rachel Maddow Show, and provided left-liberal, feminist, and gay perspectives on the news of the day, while MSNBC added The Ed Show in 2009, in which Ed Schultz provided a left-liberal populist and strongly pro-labor take on news and politics. Hence, by 2009, MSNBC provided a liberal counterbalance to Fox News. Since that time, Fox News shows have attacked the Democrats and boosted the Republican party line of the day, while MSNBC attacked Republicans and usually took pro-Democratic Party positions (as long as the Dems took properly liberal positions).

A corporate cable network The Comedy Channel’s The Daily Show with Jon Stewart broke new ground in providing critique of conservative politicians and media. Comedian Jon Stewart took over as host of The Daily Show in January 1999, focusing his satirical news commentary on politics and the national media, providing nightly satire of recent news stories, political figures and commentators, and the media and entertainment industries. It has won 18 Primetime Emmy Awards and is the longest running program on Comedy Central, and is a popular source of news for younger audiences.10

One of Stewart’s regular “correspondent” satirists, Stephen Colbert, launched a Comedy Central spin-off show The Colbert Report in 2005, brilliantly satirizing rightwing commentators by playing a pompous rightwing pundit himself, thus expanding comedic critique of Republican Party and the rightwing attack machine.11 Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher, whose late-night political talk show ran on Comedy Central from 1993 to 1997 and on ABC from 1997 to 2002, was followed by Real Time with Bill Maher which ran on cable channel HBO from 2003 to the present. Maher initially marketed himself as a libertarian who mocked all “politically correct” dogma of the Left and Right, but increasingly labeled himself a “progressive” and aggressively supported the Democratic Party and attacked conservatives and Republicans as the years have gone by.

With the expansion of left-liberal broadcasting programs and even channels during the past decade, in the 2008 U.S. Presidential election and into the Obama years, there have been an increasing amount of sites within the corporate media that have criticized the Republican Party and supported the Democratic Party and liberal policies and politicians. As noted, there are now two competing corporate cable TV news networks that take strongly opposed political views, providing alternative universes of U.S. politics, with Fox News a reliable supporter of Republicans and conservative views, and MSNBC taking more left and liberal positions. Consequently, during the 2008 election, Fox fiercely attacked Barack Obama throughout the day and repeated Republican Party lines-of-the-day, while MSNBC promoted Obama and attacked the Republicans12 -- trends continuing into the present.

During the 2008 presidential election, it was widely perceived that the mainstream media favored Barack Obama over Republican candidates.13 Obama mastered the art of media spectacle and his message of hope and change resonated with large sectors of the mainstream media as well the public. There was also an impressive Internet spectacle in support of Obama’s presidency. Obama raised an unprecedented amount of money on the Internet, generated more than two million friends on Facebook and 866,887 friends on MySpace, and reportedly had a campaign listserv of over 10 million e-mail addresses, enabling his campaign to mobilize youth and others through text-messaging and e-mails.14 Videos compiled on Obama’s official campaign YouTube site
were accessed over 11.5 million times (Gulati, 2010, p. 195), while the YouTube (UT) music video “Obama Girl,” featuring a young woman singing about why she supports Obama interspersed with images of his speeches, received well over 5 million hits and was one of the most popular in the site’s history.15

Indeed, grassroots campaigns for Obama illustrate the impact of YouTube and Internet spectacle for participatory democracy. Among the enormous numbers of Internet-distributed artifacts for the Obama campaign, Will.i.am’s “Yes We Can” music video manifests how grassroots-initiated media artifacts can inspire and mobilize individuals to support Obama. In addition to this video made by professional musicians, there emerged grassroots-based videos made by ordinary people who produced their own videos and narratives to support Obama, collected on a YouTube (UT) Web site.16 Traditionally underrepresented youth and people of color enthusiastically created UT-style self-made videos, containing their personal narratives and reasons why they support Obama for President, and used these videos as an innovative platform for grassroots political mobilization with which to inspire and consolidate potential Obama supporters online and off-line.

Throughout major cities like Los Angeles, hundreds of Obama art posters and stickers appeared on stop signs, underpasses, buildings and billboards, with Obama’s face and the word “HOPE” emblazoned across them. Even street artists began creating Obama graffiti and urban art in public places with Obama’s image competing with those of Hollywood stars, sports figures, and other celebrities as icons of the time.

So in terms of stagecraft and spectacle, Obama’s daily stump speeches on the campaign trial, his post-victory and even post-defeat speeches in the Democratic primaries, and his grassroots Internet and cultural support demonstrated that Obama was a master of the spectacle. In the 2008 campaign against Republican candidates Sarah Palin and John McCain, Obama used media spectacle as a major instrument in his campaign, and again effectively used new media and social networking to raise money, organize, and circulate his message. During September, 2008, Obama raised an unprecedented $150 million, much of it from small Internet and personal donations, and was soaring in the polls, which showed him pulling ahead of McCain nationally and in the significant battleground states. As he entered the last weeks of the campaign in November, Obama presented the spectacle of a young, energetic, articulate candidate who had run what many considered an almost flawless campaign and attempted during the election’s final days to project images of hope, change and bringing the country together to address its growing problems and divisions --- exactly the message that Obama started off his campaign with.

On election night, in Grant Park in Chicago — the site of the spectacle “The Whole World is Watching” during the Democratic convention in 1968, when the police tear-gassed antiwar spectators, and the site a year later of the Weather Underground abortive “Days of Rage” spectacle — in 2008 Chicago hosted a peaceful assembly of a couple of hundred thousand spectators, mostly young and of many colors, that had assembled to celebrate Obama’s historical victory. In the crowd, television networks showed close-ups of celebrities like Jesse Jackson, tears streaming down his face, a jubilant Spike Lee, a solemn and smiling Oprah Winfrey, and others who joined the young crowd to hear Obama’s victory speech. The park hushed into silence as McCain gave his concession speech and the audience nodded and applauded respectfully.

When Obama, his wife, Michelle, and his two beautiful girls took stage, the crowd went wild and the eyes of the world were watching the spectacle of Barack Obama becoming president of the United States. Television networks showed the spectacle of people celebrating throughout the United States, from Times Square to Atlanta, and even throughout the world. There were special
celebrations in countries like Kenya and Indonesia where Obama had relatives or had lived and his connections to these countries were producing national shrines that would be tourist destinations. Obama had become a global spectacle and his stunning victory would make him a world celebrity superstar of global media and politics.

In the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election, Barack Obama’s mastery of media spectacle thus helped generate a coalition based on hope and change that produced a decisive victory over his Republican opponents. Obama was seen by his followers as the One, a candidate of youth and charisma who inspired a generation to believe that meaningful change could be created in the United States.

In 2012, media spectacle in the U.S. Presidential election focused, by contrast, on the struggle between the two major candidates and their parties. Hence, while the personality and charisma of Barack Obama was arguably at the center of the 2008 presidential election, in 2012 I suggest that the spectacle resided in the campaign between Obama and his Republican challenger Mitt Romney. In much of the presidential race, the Republican Romney became at times a negative media spectacle, while the Democrat “no drama Obama” was often presented in the media as calm, cool, professional and very much the President. Consequently, while Obama’s personality and charisma were perhaps decisive in winning the 2008 campaign, in 2012, it was arguably his campaign team and strategy that was central to his victory, using Obama’s presidential record and agenda to push the campaign, with Obama largely serving as a prop, as he himself acknowledged during the course of the election (Kellner 2012a).

It is too soon to assess the Obama era and the ways that increasingly fragmented mainstream media and new media and social networking affected his presidency, the limits of governing through media spectacle, and Obama’s actual accomplishments and failures. I want to conclude, however, with some reflections on how alternative and new media play an important role in keeping democracy alive.

**Alternative and New Media**

A community will evolve only when a people control their own communications- Frantz Fanon

Over the past decade or more, the oppositional and investigative function of traditional journalism in the United States has largely fallen to alternative media and the Internet and new media. I have argued in this paper that the only way that a democratic social order can be maintained is for the mainstream media to assume their democratic function of critically discussing all issues of public concern and social problems from a variety of viewpoints and fostering spirited public debate, accompanied by the development of vigorous and competent investigative and alternative media. The democratic imperative that the mainstream corporate press and broadcasting provide a variety of views on issues of public interest and controversy has been increasingly sacrificed, as has their responsibility to serve as a check against excessive government or corporate power and corruption. As I have documented (Kellner 1990, 2001, 2003a, 2005), there is a crisis of democracy in the United States in part because the mainstream corporate media have been biased toward Republicans and conservatives over the past two decades. Mainstream corporate media tend to promote the interests of the corporations that own them, which tend to be pro-market and anti-regulation and have largely advanced the interests of corporate institutions and conservative politics.
To remedy this situation, first of all there must be a strengthening of the media reform movement and recognition of the importance of media politics in the struggle for democratization and the creation of a just society, and support and development of alternative media. Democratizing the media system will require development of a dynamic reform movement and recognition for all progressive social movements of the importance of invigorating the media system for forward-looking social change and addressing urgent social problems and issues. This process will involve sustained critique of the corporate media; calls for reregulation; and the revitalization of public television, cultivation of community and public radio, improved public access television, an expansion of investigative and public service journalism, and full democratic utilization of the Internet. Since corporations control the mainstream press, broadcasting, and other major institutions of culture and communication, there is little hope that the corporate media will be democratized without major pressure or increased government regulation of a sort that is not on the horizon in the present moment in most parts of the world.

The Internet and new media, by contrast, provide potential for a democratic revitalization of the public sphere. The Internet and social networking makes more information accessible to a greater number of people, more easily, and from a wider array of sources than any instrument of information and communication in history. It is constantly astonishing to discover the extensive array of material available, articulating every conceivable point of view and providing news, opinion, and sources of a striking variety and diversity. Moreover, the Internet allows two-way communication and democratic participation in public dialogue, activity that is essential to producing a vital democracy.

One of the major contradictions of the current era is that for the wired world at least, and increasingly the public at large, a rich and diverse information environment is expanding, consisting of a broad spectrum of radio and television broadcasting networks; print media and publications; and the global village of the Internet and social networking sites, which contain the most varied and extensive sources of information and entertainment ever assembled in a single medium. The Internet can send disparate types and sources of information and images instantly throughout the world and has been used by a variety of progressive and oppositional groups (see Best and Kellner 2001; Kellner 1999; Kahn and Kellner 2003; and Lievrouw 2011).

Still, the majority of people in the USA today get their news and information from a highly ideological and limited corporate media, creating a major division between the informed and uninformed in the contemporary era. Of course, right-wing and reactionary forces can and have used the Internet to promote their political agendas as well. In a short time, one can easily access an exotic witch’s brew of websites maintained by the Ku Klux Klan and myriad neo-Nazi assemblages, including the Aryan Nation, various militia groups, and the right-wing Republican attack apparatus. Hence, the Internet is a contested terrain with progressive, reactionary, and corporate forces using the technology for their conflicting agendas. To be sure, much of the world is not yet wired, many people do not even read, and different inhabitants in various parts of the globe receive their information and culture in very dissimilar ways through varying sources, media, and forms. Thus, the type and quality of information vary tremendously, depending on an individual’s access and ability to properly interpret and contextualize it.

Democracy, however, requires informed citizens and access to information and thus the viability of democracy is dependent on citizens seeking out crucial information, having the ability to access and appraise it, and to engage in public conversations about issues of importance. Democratic media reform and alternative media are thus crucial to revitalizing and even preserving the democratic project in the face of powerful corporate and political forces. How media can be
democratized and what alternative media can be developed will of course be different in various
parts of the world, but without a democratic media politics and alternative media, democracy itself
cannot survive in a vigorous form, nor will a wide range of social problems be engaged or even
addressed.

Alternative media need to be connected with progressive movements to revitalize democracy
and bring an end to the current conservative hegemony. After the defeat of Barry Goldwater in
1964 when conservatives were routed and appeared to be down for the count, they built up a
movement of alternative media and political organizations; liberals and progressives now face the
same challenge. In the current situation, we cannot expect much help from the corporate media and
need to develop ever more vigorous alternative media. The past decades have seen many important
steps in the fields of documentary film, digital video and photography, community radio, public
access television, an always expanding progressive print media, and an ever-growing liberal and
progressive Internet and blogosphere. While the right has more resources to dedicate to these
projects, the growth of progressive democratic public spheres has been impressive.

One result of both the 2008 and 2012 U.S. Presidential elections has been the decentering and
marginalizing of the importance of the corporate media punditocracy by Internet, blogosphere, new
media, and social networking sources. A number of websites and blogs have been dedicated to
deconstructing mainstream corporate journalism, taking apart everyone from the right-wing
spinners on Fox to reporters for the New York Times. An ever-proliferating number of websites
have been attacking mainstream pundits, media institutions, and misreporting. Further, during this
period, bloggers like Bob Somerby on www.dailyhowler.com (now at
http://dailyhowler.blogspot.com/; accessed August 3, 2014) and others savaged mainstream media
figures, disclosing their ignorance, bias, and incompetence, while also criticizing relentlessly the
Bush-Cheney Gang, Republican Party policies, and increasingly rightwing conservatives.

As a response there were fierce critiques of the blogosphere by mainstream media pundits and
sources, although many in the corporate mainstream have developed blogs, appropriating the
genre for themselves, and at present blogs are becoming mainstream themselves, used by
commentators, politicians, celebrities, and ordinary citizens alike. Yet mainstream corporate
broadcasting media, and especially television, continue to exert major political influence in the U.S.
and other contemporary societies, and constant critique of corporate and state media should be
linked with efforts at reform and developing alternatives, as activists continue to create ever more
developed and distributed critical and oppositional media linked to ever-expanding social
movements. New media and social networking thus continue to have democratic potential, for
without adequate information, intelligent debate, criticism of the established institutions and
parties, and meaningful alternatives, democracy is but an ideological phantom, without life or
substance.

In 2011, the North African Arab Uprisings, European movements against global capital, and the
Occupy movement used new media, social networking, and media spectacle to promote democratic
agendas and to propel movements against global capitalism and totalitarian dictatorships in the
Middle East. As I describe in my book Media Spectacle and Insurrection, 2011: From the Arab
Uprisings to Occupy Everywhere (Kellner 2012a), the year 2011 witnessed the Arab Uprisings,
insurrection in Syria and other Middle East countries, European movements against austerity
following global financial crisis, the Occupy movements, and other political insurrections, cascaded
through broadcasting, print, digital media, and various social networking sites, seizing people’s
attention and emotions, and generating complex and multiple effects that may make 2011 as
memorable a year in the history of social upheaval as 1968, and perhaps one as significant. These
events suggest that the media and media spectacle are a contested terrain in the contemporary moment and sometimes support democratic and progressive movements and sometimes corporate capitalist and state power and reactionary agendas.

In the summer of 2014, the primacy of media spectacle on a global scale was apparent in the Ukrainian conflict, and then in the bitter conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. While there was much global media coverage of the uprising in Ukraine in November 2013 which drove a pro-Russian leadership out of office in Kiev and quickly split Ukraine in half as pro-Russian forces seized the Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. With battles between pro- and anti-government forces raging in Eastern Ukraine, the shooting down of a civilian Malaysian Airlines jetliner Flight 17 on July 17, 2014, and the media spectacle of the search for the plane and recovery of the bodies, placed the Ukrainian conflict at the forefront of U.S. and global media when it was apparent that pro-Russian separatists shot down the plane, apparently with a Russian-made missile. First, a debate about who was responsible became a major media spectacle of the epoch, followed by global focus on the recovery of the bodies, and then U.S. and E.U. sanctions against Russia, a move which threatened to bring back the Cold War as tensions between the superpowers intensified.

While the Ukrainian conflict continued to rage in Eastern Ukraine and play out on the world stage as relations between Russia and the West worsen, yet another war between the Palestinians and Israelis exploded in July 2014 when Israel responded to rocket attacks from Hamas against Israel with missile bombardments of Gaza, followed by Israeli troops invading the area. Daily pictures of the media spectacle of the destruction of Gaza by Israeli bombardments, with hundreds of civilian casualties and hundreds of thousands displaced in Gaza. Growing world outrage at the carnage and tragedy led to global demonstrations against Israel and condemnation of its attacks on Gaza civilians and their institutions and infrastructure, broadcast daily through global meeting. Yet the U.S. continued to supply Israel with weapons and to support its aggressive response to Hamas attacks. However, the horrific media spectacle of an apparent Israeli attack on a UN school and killing of innocents, the second in as many weeks, led the U.S. to finally criticize Israel with pressure growing for Israel to stop its attacks (although there apparently continues to be pressure within Israel to totally destroy Hamas and its network of tunnels) as I write in early August with another cease-fire in place.

Hence, it should be acknowledged that political and military conflicts in the contemporary era are mediated through media spectacle. I have argued in this study that the terrain of contemporary media is highly contradictory and contested. I would not argue that established state and corporate media are reactionary and undemocratic per se, while new media and social networking are progressive, for the opposite could be the case in many contexts. Rather, within the current media spectrum, I am arguing that alternative media and social networking have democratic and progressive potential that should be recognized and utilized.

Hence, throughout the contemporary global world, the media and citizens need to promote democracy by articulating a full range of opinions on matters of public importance, making sure that the government and dominant institutions are responsible and do not abuse power, and by seeing that powerful institutions are playing according to rule of law and a democratic social order. The political struggles of the future will be fought on the terrain of the media which are increasingly important forces within social and political life and which are a key component of democracy. Consequently, the use of alternative media, despite limitations noted above, can be a powerful force in promoting more democratic societies.
References


Notes

1 The conception of democracy upon which I am drawing here has been developed in Kellner (1990, 2001). In this paper, I largely focus on the configuration of the media and democracy in the past several decades in the United States.

2 See the discussion of the media and democracy in Kellner (1990), Chapters 2 and 3; on the Federal Communications Act of 1934 and on the battle for democratic media in the 1930s, see McChesney (1993). For an earlier history and overview of corporate media and politics in the United States, see Halberstam (1979).

3 On global media consolidation and its impact, see McChesney (2000); Compaine, and Gomery (2000); Baker (2007).

4 On media consolidation and its impact in the U.S. over the past decades, see Herman and Chomsky (1988); Schiller (1990); Kellner (1990); McChesney (1993, 1997, 2000, 2004); Bagdikian (2004); and McChesney and Nichols (2012).

5 To this day, Drudge is continuing to trudge along, daily attacking the Obama administration and taking the Republican Party attack line of the day; see http://www.drudgereport.com/ (accessed on August 4, 2014).

6 On the rise and escalation of media spectacle as a dominant form of news, information, and culture, see Kellner (2003 and 2012).

7 I show how the mainstream corporate media benefited the Republican Party and promoted their politics, candidates, and ideologies during the 1980s in Kellner 1990 and 1992. I document how the corporate media benefited Republicans and the Bush-Cheney administration in the 2000 U.S. presidential election in Kellner 2001, and more generally document how the corporate media in the U.S. served Republican Party interests throughout the Bush-Cheney era in Kellner 2005. My analysis in this article during the Obama era, marked by a proliferation of new media and social networking, suggests a more complex and contested media constellation in the U.S. in the contemporary moment; see Kellner 2012a for elaboration.

8 The rise and growing influence of a right-wing Republican media propaganda and attack apparatus has been well documented in Alterman (2000 and 2003); Brock (2004); Conason (2003); and Miller (2005). In Kellner 2005, I update and expand my critique of right-wing and corporate media and show how they generally promoted the agenda of the Bush/Cheney administration.

9 On Fox News conservative bias, see Amann (2007); Brock, Rabin-Havt, and Media Matters (2012); and Muto (2013). For my take on Murdoch and his global media empire, see Douglas Kellner (2012) and (2013).

10 For Stewart’s take on the media and contemporary U.S. politics, see Stewart and The Writers of The Daily Show (2004).

11 In 2013, Colbert won the Emmy for Outstanding Variety Series “The Daily Show” with Jon Stewart had won in this category for 10 years in a row.

12 For my take on Obama and the 2008 presidential election, see Kellner, (2009a) and (2009b).


14 On Obama’s mobilization of the Internet, see Gulati (2010), Cornfield (2010), and Kellner (2012) and (forthcoming).

15 See the video at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKsoXHYICqU (accessed on August 4, 2014). For my analysis of the role of new media in the 2008 presidential election, see Kellner 2009a.
17 See Chapter 1 of Kellner (2012).
18 For a variety of perspectives on alternative media, see Couldry and Curran (2003) and Lievrouw (2011).