CHAPTER TWELVE

Coda

The Advent of the Media

BY THE late 1920s, the media in America and other advanced societies formed a new constellation of power. At its center was an array of large organizations dominating communication in print, on the screen, and in the air, while the constellation's most brilliant lights—movie stars, radio personalities, influential columnists and commentators, and other luminaries—were visible to a vast public, national in scope. The press had long been a force to be reckoned with; now the motion pictures, broadcasting, and allied entertainment and advertising industries represented additional channels of influence.

What was new, however, was not simply the plurality of media, nor even their mass character. The media were increasingly a source of wealth, and power relations had accordingly changed in the United States and to some extent in other liberal democracies. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the press depended on governments and political parties for subsidy; it was only with the growth of advertising and circulation in the mid- to late 1800s that newspapers were able to become formidable institutions in their own right apart from politics. Radio and the motion pictures had also emerged as sources of wealth and fame. Now, moreover, the modes of political communication had changed, and parties and politicians increasingly depended on independently financed media for access to the public's eyes and ears. Indeed, in the United

States, where the private broadcast networks in the 1930s extended interest-free, long-term credit to the two major parties to buy political advertising, the subsidy relationship had even been reversed.

The ability of the media to exert a force of their own depended on both their autonomy from state control and their commercial independence. In both these respects, America had provided especially fertile ground for their development, and as a phenomenon of power the media were more fully advanced in the United States than anywhere else: a potent but still decentralized press, practicing a brand of aggressive, often sensational journalism; a movie business concentrated in a handful of companies that dominated screens abroad as well as at home; and the world's only significant commercial broadcast industry, with hundreds of local stations and two national network organizations. These institutions were the harbingers of a new era when the media were an independent factor in politics—no less important, for example, than the political parties that had once held sway over many of them. Reporting a president's State of the Union address, for example, journalists by the early 1900s were far more likely than their nineteenth-century predecessors to assume the role of independent interpreters of politics and provide their own analyses of the speech's significance.[1] Syndicated political columnists began to appear in the 1920s, and some of the most influential newspaper columnists doubled as radio commentators, commanding a larger audience on a regular basis than any political figure, except possibly the president.

The media had also become a phenomenon of power in another sense. Their reach through space and time was far greater than ever before. In a sense, they had fulfilled the democratic hope of universal access so well that they were developing into a nearly ubiquitous aspect of daily experience. Cultural forms that had once been hard to acquire were becoming hard to escape. The change had begun, if not with printing itself, then with the revolution of cheap print and the growth of penny newspapers, dime novels, and other throwaway reading matter available for quick scanning on the go. The printed word also became part of the built environment as signs, electric lights, and advertising billboards went up in nineteenth-century cities. A similar process then happened with the environment of sound. The phonograph, radio, and the talkies reshaped aural experience. Broadcasting invaded the routines of daily life at home, at work, in private automobiles, and in public places as a growing majority of people listened to the radio for hours every day—an average of more than four hours daily

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in the United States, according to several studies during the 1930s. Particularly after the rise of the networks, radio brought professional entertainment, advertising jingles, news from abroad, and the voices of political leaders directly into the home. Playing at all hours of day and night, Susan Douglas writes, radio "made music a more integral, structuring part of everyday life and individual identity."[2] As in other areas, easy access bred a continual taste for novelty; melodies became familiar so much more quickly than before that the average lifetime of a popular song was now measured in months instead of years.

The plenitude of popular media ratcheted up the competition for eyes and ears. Banner headlines in American papers had begun to scream in the 1890s, and now tabloid newspapers—in Britain beginning with the *Daily Mirror* in 1903 and in the United States with New York's *Daily News* in 1919—exemplified the media's frenzied quest for attention.[3] By the early 1930s, advertising men were already saying that the public had become saturated with messages and that effective advertising consequently needed to be more emphatic and intrusive.

At the same time, communications continued to be a factor in economic growth and military power. Broader access to telecommunications, more advanced long-distance networks, more rapid diffusion of innovation in communication technologies and products—these were sources of economic and strategic advantage. Both wired and wireless networks connected buyers and sellers, facilitating their transactions and enabling them to operate more efficiently. In the military, advances in radio were critical at first for naval operations and then more generally enhanced command-and-control of mobile units. World War I highlighted the vital importance of both communications infrastructure and mass media. The belligerents struggled over control of submarine cables and radiotelegraphy, invested in new radio technology, and conscripted the mass media into propaganda campaigns to mobilize patriotism at home and demoralize the enemy abroad. The manipulation of the press, the creation of false newsreel footage, and the intensive use of advertising during the war left a sense of disgust afterward, but the war experience also sharpened critical awareness of the media's role in what Walter Lippmann in 1920 called "the manufacture of consent."[4] The explosion of radio during the following decade reinforced this growing awareness of media power.

The reach and pervasiveness of the mass media, as well as the economic and military value of communications networks and technologies,

made constitutive choices about them all the more important. In the 1930s, the world was witness to a stark contrast in political models of communications between the totalitarian and liberal worlds. The fascists in Germany and communists in Russia viewed the communications media as essential means for extending the power of their regimes more comprehensively than was conceivable ever before. Totalitarian states differed from merely authoritarian ones in their capacity to reach into civil society, private life, and even (so they hoped) the interior of consciousness—and the modern media were a key aspect of this all-embracing form of rule.

The liberal democracies denied the state such complete control of communications, culture, and civil society, but the modern media nonetheless posed a dilemma for them as well. The traditional conceptions of liberal democracy had assumed and exalted a press that was not only free from state control but also at the service of public discussion, readily accessible to contending parties and interests. The technology and economics of the print media were compatible with the easy entry of diverse viewpoints into the public sphere. The new mass media, however, did not fit this model as well as the press did. They did not receive the same degree of protection from state supervision; control was more highly centralized; and advertising and mass marketing drove their content, particularly in the case of commercial radio in the United States. The origins of modern communications had been, in critical respects, liberal and democratic. How, then, had the media developed along lines that were so deeply in tension with those ideals? Could the mass media do the job that democracy classically assigned to the press—or did the commercially driven media and new techniques of mass persuasion so distort public knowledge and degrade public discussion as to make popular self-government impossible?

The Sources of Media Power

The structure of the media, I have been arguing, resulted from constitutive choices at key junctures that affected the long-run path of development of communications. From the seventeenth to the mid–twentieth century, these decisions were made in the context of three overarching realities: the primacy of the nation-state, the emergence of liberal consti-

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National interests, as political leaders variously understood them, guided critical choices about communications, and differences among states—their structure, situation, and ideology—figured at key points in the constitutive process. Centralizing absolutist regimes in seventeenth-century Europe used communications to consolidate their power. They sought to control the press not only by censoring it but also by limiting it exclusively to printing guilds concentrated in the national capital. The earliest newspapers were typically court gazettes. While opening up postal systems to public use, state officials used postal monopolies to generate tax revenue, to regulate news reported in manuscript or print, and to conduct surveillance and espionage. In the nineteenth century, the continental European states also developed the electric telegraph as a state monopoly, conceiving it at first as a military technology and then treating it as an extension of postal functions. Britain's concern about coordinating its far-flung imperial interests led to a focused effort to build up international submarine cable networks under favored private companies. In the nineteenth century, as before, multilingual states in Europe required the use of an official language and suppressed the culture of national minorities, and many of those groups, in turn, sought to achieve national independence, partly through the cultivation of their own literature and establishment of their own media. The creation of national broadcast monopolies in the twentieth century reflected the same interest in configuring the public in the image of the nation. In short, interests in state- and nation-building were driving forces in development of the media, often leading to state monopolies or other direct state involvement.

The greater role of private enterprise in communications in the United States is partly attributable to the distinctive conditions of American political development. Military and other security-related concerns figured far less prominently in the constitutive decisions about communications in America from the founding of the republic to World War I. The geographical position of the United States offered protection from threatening foreign powers; immigrants came in great numbers, but they were so fragmented among themselves and had such strong incentives for assimilation that they posed no challenge to the primacy of English

or prevailing patterns of cultural and political authority. When new communications technologies appeared, the government did not reserve them first for military use, and when foreign-language papers proliferated in the late nineteenth century, the government made no effort to control them.

Nonetheless, American decisions about communications did reflect an interest in nation-building of a particular kind. The early design of the Post Office as a comprehensive network for circulating political news as well as private correspondence reflected a deliberate effort to use communication to hold the new nation together. Law and policy in nineteenth-century America generally fostered an open, continent-wide, national market—and American postal and telecommunications development formed part of that project. America was not immune to security concerns. During the Civil War and World War I, the federal government restricted freedom of expression, and the World War I period also saw a demand for "100 percent" Americanism that departed from the earlier tolerance for immigrant cultures. In general, however, security interests were not the governing criteria in constitutive choices about communications. Postal confidentiality, the privatization of the telegraph, and the Navy's loss of control over policy toward radio after World War I all reflected this general tendency to give priority to private and commercial interests.

In both Europe and America, weak or divided state authority in the eighteenth century helped to incubate the earliest form of media power—an independent press. The absence of any strong central authority in the Netherlands created the basis in its commercial centers for a flourishing, export-oriented press and a de facto public sphere that extended into France through illicit circulation that royal authorities were unable to suppress. In England beginning in the 1690s, and in colonial America beginning in the 1720s and 1730s, divisions among political elites and the advent of competition in printing were both factors in the stirring of open public controversy and the beginnings of a free press. In the first instance, then, a public sphere and relatively autonomous press emerged from the breakdown of monopolies in both politics and markets—even before the press enjoyed any affirmative guarantee of its rights.

The emergence of liberal constitutionalism, however, institutionalized the autonomy of the press from the state and provided for important correlative protections. Liberal state-building involved the building-in of

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limitations on the state, not just the expansion of its functions, and these limitations gave a greater role to the press as an agent of public accountability. For example, the demand that not only trials, but also legislative sessions, be open to the public gave the press a right of access to certain kinds of political news. Even during the colonial period, these rights advanced further in America than in England itself. While the English press, after the end of licensing in 1695, enjoyed a limited freedom, the government used a combination of policies—high stamp taxes, prosecutions for seditious libel, and bribery and intimidation—to keep dissent in line and to prevent the emergence of a popularly based opposition press.

In contrast, the Revolutionary period in America, beginning with the resistance to the Stamp Act, created an alliance between patriots and printers that elevated freedom of the press to high symbolic importance and gave it a force in political tradition beyond its codification in the Bill of Rights and prevailing judicial interpretation. The Stamp Act resistance became the precedent for resisting and rejecting any special taxes on the press. Although newspapers routinely put their liberty into practice by vilifying public officials, postal policies were nonetheless designed to subsidize newspapers of all kinds without limit. In addition to these general subsidies, printers also received more selective benefits from their political sponsors in the form of government contracts. But the fragmented structure of the state—the division among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, as well as federal, state, and local authority—prevented any single party from monopolizing subsidies and consolidating press power. Before 1860, when political subsidies were most important, frequent changes in party control of the presidency and houses of Congress led to high turnover in the newspapers enjoying special privileges. Unlike their counterparts in Paris and London, newspapers based in Washington were never able to gain a dominant position over newspapers outside the capital (for example, through local editions of national papers). The suspicion of centralized power that Americans embodied in governmental checks and balances carried over to the press and helped to keep it highly decentralized during its formative period in America.

Liberty of the press became the paradigm for claims of free expression through all means of communication, but governments did not necessarily extend the same protection to other media. Indeed, laws and norms regarding free expression have tended to be media-specific. Despite the end of licensing of the press, England long maintained prior censorship

of the theater. Similarly, on both sides of the Atlantic, the new popular media of the early twentieth century—the motion pictures and broadcasting—did not receive the same autonomy as the press.

The history of freedom of expression looks different once this varied pattern is taken into account. According to the usual American narrative, the rights of free speech guaranteed in the Constitution went into a long legal twilight until the emergence of modern First Amendment jurisprudence on the Supreme Court in the 1920s. The twenties did represent a watershed in both the judicial and broader cultural understanding of free speech. But the nineteenth century was neither so grim nor the period after the 1920s so bright as this picture suggests. With certain well-known exceptions—the Sedition Act crisis in 1798, southern suppression of abolitionist literature, and Lincoln's control of war news and brief suspension of papers during the Civil War—the press in America enjoyed an exceptional degree of political autonomy throughout the period before World War I. Populist and socialist newspapers, for example, circulated freely. An important break occurred, however, with the growing use of the federal government's postal powers for purposes of moral censorship after 1865; the postal powers were also the basis for much of the political censorship during World War I. While court decisions began overturning censorship of both literature and political dissent during the 1920s and 1930s, they upheld censorship of the movies and radio. By this period, the pro-censorship groups previously concerned about indecent literature increasingly turned their attention to the movies and broadcasting; to some extent, the press enjoyed greater liberty after the 1920s because the focus of moral regulation turned toward media that seemed to many people, including judges, to be more dangerous.

The power of the media, however, has its roots not only in legal rights but also in commercial success, and the movies and broadcasting, like the press, became highly profitable industries in America. Commercial independence itself had a political basis; newspaper, magazine, and book publishing flourished in nineteenth-century America because the press was not only free but favored. The policies benefiting the press included postal subsidies, which enabled first newspapers and then magazines to reach more subscribers and thereby attract more advertising; intellectual property rights, which provided an incentive for investment in publishing (and later other media); and the absence of taxes on publications. The press also benefited indirectly from the early state support for roads,

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canals, and railroads, which promoted the development of a national market for print media, and federal as well as local support of education, which expanded the reading public. Innovations in printing and papermaking worked in the same direction—that is, making it profitable for entrepreneurs to adopt high-volume, low-price, mass-market publishing strategies, beginning with the penny press. Advertising was the key here as it enabled newspapers, magazines, and other media to be sold at a price below cost—in the case of radio programs, to be given to listeners at no price, in exchange for their attention.

Under these conditions, the American press and other media became more oriented than their European counterparts to a popular audience. Comparisons between American and European newspapers were already highlighting this contrast in the nineteenth century. American innovations in journalism and graphic design made American papers easier to read. The great urban newspapers of the late 1800s made more use of illustration, comic strips, and easily grasped narratives as they competed for a mass audience that included large numbers of immigrants.

The same orientation to a polyglot urban market later affected the motion pictures. The ethnic diversity of the movie audience in America's cities at the turn of the century required moviemakers to create films that could appeal across cultural boundaries. One of the reasons that American movie companies proved so successful in exporting films to Europe is that they had already figured out how to appeal to Europeans who had come to America. Entrepreneurial talent from immigrant communities also wrested control of the movie industry from the largely native-born Edison movie trust and proved more adept in responding to new tastes and business opportunities. In short, the American popular market and the diversity of the society helped to generate cultural enterprises enjoying competitive advantages over their international rivals.

Another aspect of American development contributed to comparative advantage in telecommunications and later broadcasting. American policy did not block single organizations from dominating the postal, telegraph, and telephone networks. But the United States consistently barred organizations controlling a dominant network from extending their power to a newly emerging one. Congress declined to give the Post Office permanent control of the telegraph in 1846. Western Union lost control of the telephone in 1879, and a federal antitrust suit forced AT&T to separate itself from Western Union in 1913. None of the foregoing was able to

control broadcasting in America, although AT&T had the raw economic power to monopolize network radio in the 1920s. In other words, while allowing a high level of concentrated ownership within any mode of communications, American policy consistently favored "intermodal" competition. This was the checks-and-balances framework applied to restraining private power in communications.

The American bar against the expansion of legacy organizations contrasts sharply with the European policy of consolidating telegraph, telephone, and often broadcasting under the unified control of postal authorities. The significance of the European practice is not only that it put the government in control of all the major networks and sacrificed competition; it also put postal (and later telegraph) officials with little orientation to new technology in charge of more technically complex and dynamic networks. America's twentieth-century lead in telecommunications technology, especially long-distance land lines, stemmed largely from this difference. Similarly, despite the rise of network oligopolies in American broadcasting, talent in radio and later television had a variety of local as well as national outlets, whereas European states concentrated decision-making power in a single national broadcast authority and thereby discouraged competition and private investment in program production. As a result, when broadcast programming began to be exported, the ratings-driven, market-oriented, popular-minded American industry was far better positioned to seize opportunities for international expansion.[5]

Here, then, were the political origins of the power and wealth of the media as well as of the competitive edge of the communications industries in the United States: From the founding of the republic, the federal government had given the press constitutional guarantees, postal subsidies, and other benefits that enabled newspaper, book, and magazine publishing to become economically as well as formally independent of the state and political parties. Unlike the major European states, the United States privatized telecommunications, promoted communications development on a continental scale, and resisted any special tax on the media, from the eighteenth-century stamp taxes on the press to the twentieth-century radio (and later television) license fees that other countries imposed to support broadcasting. Under these conditions, the press, and later other media in America, became more popularly oriented than their counterparts in Europe, were driven to find ways of appealing to audiences that cut across cultural boundaries, and were positioned to become

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This was the American achievement—and the American dilemma—in communications. At its origins, liberal democracy cherished the press as a public guardian, little anticipating its metamorphosis into a powerful industry with its own imperatives. In the twentieth century, particularly in the aftermath of World War I and other developments that raised concerns about manipulation of public opinion, some critics began to ask how to reconcile democratic ideals with the media's power and limitations. The problem has never been entirely resolved—it never will be—but some productive efforts to address it emerged in the decades between the two world wars.

The Media and Democracy

The relationship between the commercial media and democracy has always had two sides. Commerce both distorts and enlarges the public sphere; the incentive to attract more readers, listeners, or viewers sometimes produces reckless sensationalism and sometimes engages new groups in public debate. In the nineteenth century, as newspapers became increasingly dependent on advertising, editors and publishers began to see their readers less as members of the polity and more as consumers; yet advertising revenue also enabled papers to field far more reporters and provide a wider range of news independent of political subsidy. Pulitzer's equation—"circulation means advertising, and advertising means money, and money means independence"—captured the potential relationship between commercial success and editorial autonomy. It was on this basis that journalism produced both the greatest muckraking and the worst jingoism.

As the press and other media grew in scale and influence during the early twentieth century, however, a variety of countervailing efforts emerged to mold public opinion. Business leaders turned to a new kind of expert—the public relations specialist—for advice about how to present themselves to the media and the world. Advertising became concerned not just with selling products but also with enhancing corporate

images, and publicity agents proliferated, peddling ready-to-use material to reporters and editors who routinely printed it in their papers. Government departments created press bureaus, and presidents, beginning with Wilson, instituted regular press conferences. The vast apparatus that Wilson established to manage public opinion during World War I epitomized these developments. That effort involved not just government propaganda and censorship but also self-censorship and misrepresentation by the press, and when the war was over, critics attacked the complicity of journalists in public deception. The concerns about the press went beyond the familiar objections to the sensationalism of Hearst and struck at the elite papers as well. In 1920, with Charles Merz, Lippmann reviewed three years' coverage of the Russian Revolution in the *New York Times* and found the paper's reporting riddled with bias and inaccuracies; on ninety-one occasions, the *Times* had said the Bolshevik regime was near collapse or reported it had already fallen. "The news about Russia," Lippmann and Merz wrote, "is a case of seeing not what was, but what men wished to see."[6]

Part of the remedy, it seemed to Lippmann, lay in a reform of journalism and the creation of new means of disciplined, scientific investigation of the public world. In *Liberty and the News*—the first and most prescriptive of three books on public opinion and democracy that he wrote during the 1920s—Lippmann argued that "in an exact sense the present crisis of western democracy is a crisis in journalism." The original essay in *Liberty and the News* was about the idea, as he explained in a letter, "that freedom of thought and speech present themselves in a new light and raise new problems because of the discovery that opinion can be manufactured." No liberty, he wrote in the book itself, exists "for a community which lacks the information by which to detect lies." If democracy was to work, the press owed the public, above all else, a "steady supply of trustworthy and relevant news": "There can be no higher law in journalism than to tell the truth and shame the devil." Certainly the truth was "slippery," but precisely for that reason, "good reporting requires the exercise of the highest of the scientific virtues," such as the habit "of ascribing no more credibility to a statement than it warrants."

Lippmann was urging reporters to be more "objective," a term that was just coming into use in writing about journalism. Critics now often dismiss objectivity as a professional ideology, but it is important to understand the practices that Lippmann was urging reporters to adopt. He

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wanted journalists to emulate science by developing a "sense of evidence" and forthrightly acknowledging the limits of available information; he urged them to dissect slogans and abstractions and to refuse to withhold news or put moral uplift or any other cause ahead of veracity. What Lippmann was demanding of journalists was, above all, accountability. He called on newspapers to identify the sources of articles, whether from a press bureau or by an individual reporter; to publish the names of individual staff members; and to be held responsible for errors and falsehoods. The entire field of journalism, he said, needed to be upgraded to a profession to attract first-class educated talent. But journalists could not do the necessary work alone; they needed experts to organize information for them, and Lippmann called for the creation of "political observatories"—research institutes both inside and outside of government—to provide systematic evidence that could be used, for example, to evaluate the performance of government agencies.[7]

A few years later, in his larger work *Public Opinion*, Lippmann shifted his emphasis to a greater role for expertise; by this time, he was more despairing about both the press and the public on the grounds that neither reporters nor citizens were likely to overcome the stereotyped "pictures in our heads" that most people have of the public world.[8] *Public Opinion* had the greater academic influence—James W. Carey calls it the "founding book in American media studies."[9] But it was the earlier program of journalistic professionalism and expanded data-gathering and research in organizations insulated from political control that actually became central to the response of liberal democracies to the problem of manipulated opinion that World War I had exposed.

But the problem itself might not be as dire as Lippmann thought. Social science research during the 1930s raised doubts about whether, in fact, the media could "manufacture" opinion. Instead of conceiving of society as consisting of isolated individuals, American sociologists in the early twentieth century saw instead a honeycomb of social organization. And, partly because they took civil society and social structure into account, the sociologists who first studied the media empirically found the effects of advertising and political campaigns to be more limited than was widely believed. The single most influential work was a study by Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet of how voters in one Ohio county made their decisions during the 1940 presidential campaign. Relatively few voters seemed to change their minds because of anything they read in

the press or heard on the radio; social relationships and personal influence were more important. Much of the impact of the media, insofar as there was any, came in what the study called a "two-step flow" via "opinion leaders" who paid close attention to public affairs and then talked with others in the community. Lazarsfeld and his coauthors drew an optimistic inference from their findings: "In the last analysis," they wrote, "more than anything else people can move other people. From an ethical point of view, this is a hopeful aspect in the serious social problem of propaganda. The side which has the more enthusiastic supporters and which can mobilize grass-roots support in an expert way has great chances of success."[10]

As this analysis became codified as the "dominant paradigm" in the sociology of communications, two explanatory factors stood out. First, the media had limited effects in changing opinions—Lazarsfeld recognized the media had a strong reinforcing effect—because of self-selection: People tended to read or listen to things they agreed with; they interpreted material according to their preconceptions; and their memory was selective. And, second, social ties and patterns of personal communication tended to "anchor" people's opinions and render them less susceptible to media influence. Lazarsfeld's "effects" paradigm is sometimes said to have assumed readers and listeners to be passive, but it is almost the opposite: People's choices about what to read or listen to and how to interpret it, as well as their own relationships and communications with each other, were the principal reasons Lazarsfeld cited for the media's limited capacity to move opinion.

This research corrected the earlier, exaggerated view of the public as easily susceptible to mass suggestion, but it suffered from its own limitations. As subsequent work on the "agenda-setting" function of the media has shown, the media could not tell people what to think but strongly affected what they thought about. Moreover, the kind of political and consumer choices Lazarsfeld and his colleagues studied often minimized media effects; at the time of the 1940 presidential election, partisan identities were strong, and most people already had opinions one way or the other about Roosevelt after he had been in office for two terms. In a situation where people had much less prior information—for example, in understanding the Russian Revolution in 1917—the media would likely have a much larger effect on public opinion.

Perhaps most important, the limited-effects model drew its conclusions from research on short-term changes in opinions and tastes and did

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not address other kinds of shifts, particularly those that develop over the long term.[11] Lazarsfeld's research, for example, did not address change from one generation to the next—between an older generation that had grown up with more traditional cultural practices and a younger generation that became more attuned from an early age to the new popular media. During the 1920s and 1930s, as older cultural traditions broke down, many parents were convinced that the media were, in a sense, alienating their children's affections, and as Lizabeth Cohen writes in her study of Chicago, "Ethnic, working-class parents were right to observe that their children craved stylish fashions, the latest motion pictures, popular tunes on the radio, and evenings at commercial dance halls." Adolescents were using the media then, as they have in other contexts, to escape "the confining ethnic worlds of their families." Yet, as Cohen points out, this was not a simple repudiation: "Rather, more like their parents than was at first apparent, young people looked to their ethnic peer groups to mediate mass culture."[12] Once again, the media were filtered through the honeycomb of social relations.

One long-term change in the media with uncertain effects was a narrowing of ideological diversity. The system of print communication that prevailed up to World War I accommodated political viewpoints across a broad spectrum. Radical newspapers such as the *Appeal to Reason* were at no technological advantage; they had the same printing presses as other publications, and the Post Office distributed them nationally on the same subsidized terms. Populist and socialist papers, though they suffered for lack of advertising revenue, rose and fell according to the vicissitudes of the movements they spoke to and for.

It was not technological change per se that narrowed the ideological spectrum. Before World War I, movies varied widely in viewpoint. With rising costs in the 1920s, however, the movies came under the control of a small number of large firms that dominated the entire industry from production to exhibition, and the next decade the industry succumbed to pressure to censor itself according to the Production Code. By the 1930s, broadcasting had followed the same course as the movies in going from an early pluralism to corporate consolidation and a narrowing of ideological boundaries.

The contrast in the operating principles of the dominant communication networks could hardly be clearer. During the nineteenth century, political views circulated via a network (the Post Office) to which even radical

papers enjoyed a right of access. Advocates of the corresponding viewpoints in the twentieth century had no comparable right to get on the radio. And while the Supreme Court provided stronger protections of political dissent beginning in the 1930s, radio and the movies were deemed outside the scope of the First Amendment. Nonetheless, in comparative terms, American radio in the 1930s was still more ideologically diverse than systems in Europe; even the BBC was less open to political controversy than commercial radio in the United States.

Some critics, particularly on the left, reacted to the popular media of the period by overgeneralizing about the homogeneity of the "culture industry," a term introduced by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, who came to America from the Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt, Germany, in the late 1930s (Adorno at first worked on Lazarsfeld's radio research in an ill-fated partnership). To the "critical theorists" of the Frankfurt School, the culture industry was a system of "mass deception" that lulled people into accepting oppression and converted art and culture into standardized commodities. What was new about the culture industry, in fact, was the "exclusion of the new." The radio, they wrote, "turns all participants into listeners and authoritatively subjects them to broadcast programs which are all exactly the same." Indeed, Horkheimer and Adorno equated American radio with fascism: "In America [radio] collects no fees from the public, and so has acquired the illusory forms of disinterested, unbiased authority which suits Fascism admirably. The radio becomes the universal mouthpiece of the Führer. . . . The inherent tendency of radio is to make the speaker's word, the false commandment, absolute." The public, in this view, was entirely passive; according to Horkheimer and Adorno, cartoons "hammer into every brain" the lesson that all individual resistance is useless. "Donald Duck in the cartoons and the unfortunate in real life get their thrashing so that the audience can learn to take their own punishment."[13]

Critical theory itself, however, was a cartoon of culture. Like many European immigrants, Horkheimer and Adorno were so hostile to popular sensibilities—Adorno abhorred jazz, for example—that they could not imagine that the new forms of culture they encountered in America were capable of yielding work of value and originality comparable to the high culture that they thought the public should be taught to appreciate.

Although radio and the movies in the 1930s had homogenizing tendencies, these weren't inherent in capitalism; the mass audience would break up in future decades. Even during the late 1930s, New Deal policies were

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attempting to limit monopoly power and promote diversity and localism in the media. The FCC's Chain Broadcasting rules in 1941 not only forced NBC to disgorge its second network (which became ABC) but also limited network control of affiliated stations. In 1938, the Department of Justice initiated an antitrust suit against the big movie studios that would eventually force the companies to give up control of local theaters. Another federal antitrust suit of this period would compel the Associated Press to serve all papers. These measures were consistent with a long tradition of policy (embodied in postal rates, for example) that gave a decentralized local press more of a role in the United States than in Europe.

The Frankfurt School critics, of course, were not interested in restoring competition or checks and balances—they objected to the conversion of the public into "mere media markets,"[14] as if printers had not been producing for the marketplace ever since Gutenberg. But markets, however much reviled, make vital contributions to a democratic public sphere that are unlikely to be made any other way. The production of original books, movies, music, and television is inherently risky: No one knows for sure whether an audience for any new work exists beforehand. Public tastes are fickle; precisely what distinguishes a hit from a dud may be unpredictable. These uncertainties give strategic importance to those who put capital at risk. As publishers and other producers of cultural goods search for new works on which to place their bets, they are continually testing the popular appeal of new genres, styles, and subjects. This entrepreneurial activity expands the scale and scope of the public sphere, extending its known frontiers.

Sometimes even a single influential work—a book, a movie, a song—can give a latent public its voice and bring it into full awareness of itself. The discovery of a new market may thereby trigger public (and private) self-discovery and alter what politics is about. While most writers and publishers and others involved in making such choices mostly stick to familiar terrain, the industry's hunger for new products is a spur to cultural as well as economic risk-taking. More amply capitalized organizations are better able to assume that kind of risk—and are far more likely to do so in a legal environment that protects free expression. Moreover, the growth of markets does not extinguish noncommercial interests in culture and public life. The market, even when its products are distasteful, is a continual stimulus to innovation outside the market and in reaction to it. In a dynamic sense, markets in liberal societies enrich the public sphere far more than they impoverish it. If, however, all were left to the market—if

government had not promoted communications networks, the press, education, and innovation while attempting to check tendencies toward excessive concentrations of power—the public sphere would be poor indeed. Our public life is a hybrid of capitalism and democracy, and we are better off for it, as long as the democratic side is able to keep the balance.

Our story stops at a point—the entry of the United States into World War II in December 1941—when some changes in the media paused and a new political framework of communications emerged. While commercial development of television and FM radio was suspended for the war's duration, the war set in motion two political changes with long-term implications: Military investment began to drive innovation in electronics, telecommunications, and computers. And the United States moved irreversibly into a central role in international political economy. Whereas the primacy of the nation-state had earlier been the overarching reality, many of the crucial decisions about communications and the media would now be made in an international context. In the coming decades—at first slowly and then with greater force—the American model of privately owned, competitively driven communications would also become far more influential in other parts of the world. The United States would export not only its culture, but also its institutions. And the global media—not all of them American by any means, but structured along the commercial lines pioneered in the United States—would become a factor of power everywhere.

All this is another story—but in many ways it is still the story this book tells. Political choices have continued to be pivotal in the constitution of the media, and the great constellation of power emerging from those choices now extends far beyond any individual country's horizon.

More than 2,000 years ago, Archimedes is supposed to have said, "Give me a lever long enough and a place to stand, and I will move the world." Many people hoping to move the modern world have thought that the media offered them a lever long enough and a place to stand—the place being in front of a microphone, camera, or computer screen. Mostly this is a delusion, as so many people are pushing in different directions. But the media certainly are mighty levers, and where our world moves in the future will depend on critical choices about them we have yet to make.

INTRODUCTION

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