

## Captains of Synergy

### *Conglomerates and the Media*

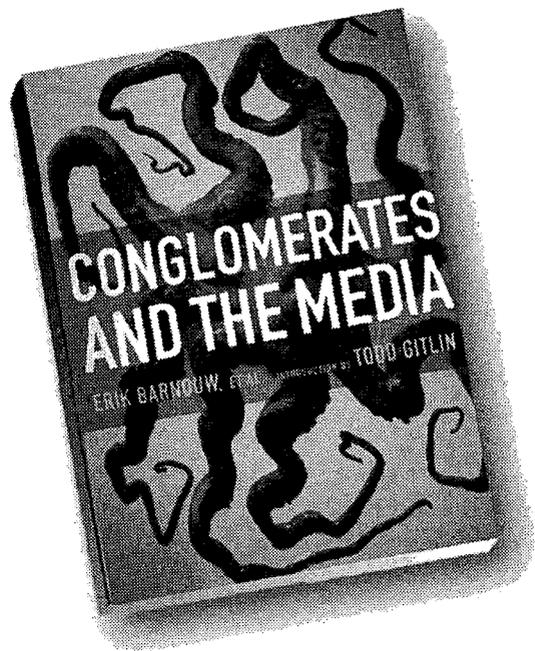
Erik Barnouw, et. al.

Introduction by Todd Gitlin

The New Press

191 pages, \$23

REVIEWED BY JOHN PALATTELLA



**A** sign of the times: Former Federal Communications Commission (FCC) chairman Reed Hundt recently praised ABC and the Sinclair Broadcast Group for reneging on their promise to Congress to broadcast high-definition signals on their new digitized television channels. Broadcasters had made the pledge—even though it isn't part of the 1996 Telecommunications Act—after Congress agreed to loan the new digitally expanded spectrum to them. Now ABC and Sinclair prefer a more lucrative arrangement. Rather than broadcast a single high-definition show, each wants to shoehorn low-resolution signals for five or 10 programs onto its digital channel. “Great. Let digital broadcasters experiment with the medium,” Hundt decreed in a *New York Times* op-ed piece. “To focus on how sharp a picture should be instead of allowing the market to work and to serve the public interest takes the debate about digital television in the wrong direction.”

Hundt, of course, is not the first FCC chairman to equate unregulated competition among media titans with the public interest. Who can forget Ronald Rea-

gan's infamous FCC chairman, Mark Fowler? Besides downsizing the FCC, which he branded “a New Deal dinosaur,” Fowler gutted broadcasting regulations and thereby set the stage for over a decade of headline-grabbing mergers: General Electric and NBC, Westinghouse and CBS, ABC and Capitol Cities Communications, Time Warner and Turner, and Disney and ABC.

These conglomerates are subjected to equal parts scorn and analysis in *Conglomerates and the Media*. The volume's nine essays, most of them expanded versions of lectures presented in the fall of 1996 at New York University, range over the newspaper, broadcast news, advertising, film and publishing industries with one question in mind: What is the effect of media conglomeration—the clustering of numerous media outlets under one corporate umbrella—on the dissemination of news and culture? The verdict is unanimous: It's disastrous.

Each essay arrives at this judgment by examining a set of issues outlined by NYU sociologist Todd Gitlin in the volume's introduction. Conglomerates, Gitlin writes, “permit and deny access

just as they choose. Accountability is not their game. Giving preferences to their corporate partners is. Catering to high-spending demographics is.” Most of the essays also echo Gitlin's style, which favors pithy apocalyptic pronouncements about the stranglehold of conglomerates on the future—“Big Brother isn't looming: Brave New World is”—over plans for battling conglomerates in the present. *Conglomerates and the Media* is a book meant to alarm, written for those already alarmed.

The book begins with essays penned by two newsroom veterans: Richard Cohen, a former senior producer of the CBS Evening News, and Gene Roberts, former managing editor of the *New York Times*. Each tells an impressionistic, cautionary tale of a calling degraded and betrayed by a conglomerate's demand for high profit margins. Cohen is no romantic. Though he believes journalists should hold the toes of the powerful to the fire, he doesn't hanker after some golden era of broadcast journalism when idealism wasn't hampered by ratings. But he does lament the recent passing of the era in which network news was the “loss

leader"—a program with high journalistic standards that lost money but won respectability for a network. Recounting numerous episodes of newsrooms pandering to sensationalism, Cohen says that conglomerates view news as just another means for luring lucrative advertisers to audiences. What he neglects to mention is how by deregulating broadcasting, Fowler's FCC encouraged profit-driven news. Among other things, broadcasters were told they no longer had to serve the public interest, except as measured by the Nielsen ratings.

Roberts explains how chain ownership of newspapers has forced editors to turn their backs on comprehensive local coverage, the very thing that makes newspapers "community institutions and valuable properties in the first place." Among Roberts' many examples is the case of how the cost-cutting strategies of chain ownership have reduced a handful of once courageous and independently owned Southern newspapers to paper tigers. Whereas during the civil rights era, papers such as the *Delta Democrat Times* consistently criticized racism, today they are outlets for little more than wire service stories and insipid lifestyle features—news that's cheap to print because it's recycled, not gathered. Chain-owned local newspapers don't serve their communities, Roberts reasons, because they lack both resources and a sense of accountability to the communities they cover.

Cohen and Roberts are better at documenting the degradation of the news over the past decade than dissecting the motives of the conglomerates. Thankfully, two other essays, the best of the volume, examine the economic exigencies of conglomerates by taking a long view of changes in the organization of media industries. Thomas Schatz, a communications professor at the University of Texas, explains how conglomeration has wrought a new kind of Hollywood studio system, which rescued the film industry from collapse during the late '60s. At that time, the studios were practically moribund, having been decimated first by antitrust rulings—which forced the studios to sell their theater chains—and then by the emergence of television. The success of blockbusters like *Star Wars* in the '70s

revitalized the industry. Studios enhanced their ability to capitalize on blockbusters during the merger-and-acquisition wave of the '80s, when deregulation let them diversify into other media.

The pursuit of a blockbuster is thus tailored to a company's well-oiled production, distribution and exhibition machinery. With a film like *Batman*, for instance, Time Warner expects to churn out not only sequels but videos, toys, books, soundtracks, clothing, theme park rides and tchotchkes. Schatz finds this "franchise mentality" worrisome because it homogenizes film into an entertainment package, and therefore "those social and political issues which cannot be rendered in sufficiently 'entertaining' terms are likely to be either ignored or relegated to the far reaches of the 500-channel universe."

Or the 500-aisle Barnes & Noble, if one is to believe Mark Crispin Miller, a communications professor at Johns Hopkins University, in his scathing portrait of the publishing industry that he claims now mimics Hollywood. The bulk of America's trade publishers belong to eight mammoth media corporations, many of them heavily invested in film and television. These companies demand tinsel-town profit margins—upwards of 15 percent from presses unaccustomed to yielding high returns. This squeeze forces editors to find blockbusters of their own and to cut costs by trimming full-time staff and skimping on manuscript production. Of course, publishers of the past sold blockbusters, but in order to bankroll the high culture they loved. Today editors sell Deepak Chopra to publish the next Deepak Chopra. "Thus have the giants shrunk the culture in part automatically," writes Miller, "by imposing that objective 'market censorship' whereby (say) Pantheon went from doing Hans Magnus

Enzensberger ... to doing *Water Gardening* and *Decorating Magic*." What's more, Miller insists that the absence of indexes and the many typos in mainstream books betokens the conglomerated trade's philistinism. (Never mind that Miller's complaint appears in an independently published book that itself lacks an index and contains, by my count, a half-dozen typos.)

Pat Aufderheide, a communications professor at American University and a contributing editor of *In These Times*, is alone among the contributors to *Conglomerates and the Media* in suggesting that any battle against conglomerates cannot be waged without considering the relationship between government regulation and industry structure. Aufderheide realizes that, like *Wired*-inspired pronouncements about the information revolution, the hand-wringing about greedy media conglomerates common among the left is an expensive indulgence. It's also misleading, because conglomerates have not devoured competition through greed alone. Their greed is sanctioned by current telecommunications regulations—or the lack thereof.

Aufderheide's discussions of public policy are somewhat sketchy but nonetheless underscore a crucial point: Media in a democracy should function to serve the public interest. Left to their own devices, media conglomerates will measure public interest according to the bottom line, so the only way to protect the public interest is through the countervailing authority of governmental regulations. But to participate in policy discussions, you have to be informed. While *Conglomerates and the Media* doesn't demystify the intricacies of FCC policy, it's a good place to start. ■

John Palattella is co-editor of *The Real Guide to Grad School*, just published by *Lingua Franca Books*.

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## Odd Man In

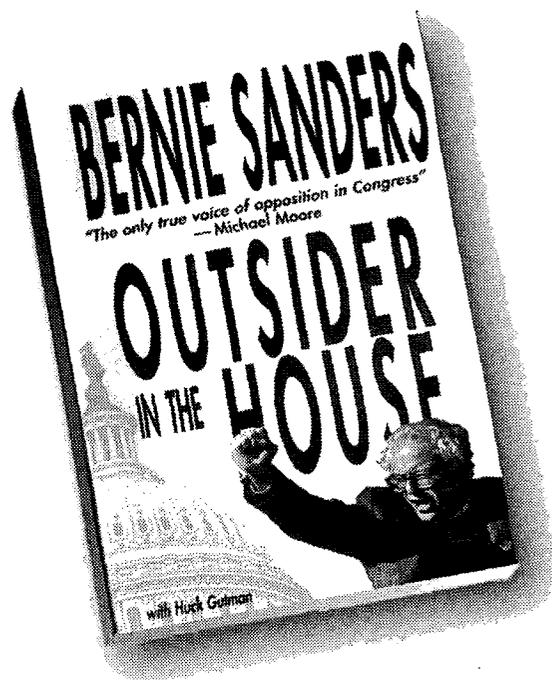
### **Outsider in the House**

By Bernie Sanders with Huck Gutman

Verso

244 pages, \$25

REVIEWED BY REP. BOB FILNER



**B**ernie Sanders is a rarity. He is the only avowed socialist in the current U.S. House of Representatives and the first socialist to serve there since the early part of the century. Elected in 1990 and now serving his fourth term as an independent, Sanders, who represents the state of Vermont, is the only member without an “R” or “D” next to his name.

There has been very little analysis of this incredible achievement by Sanders—or Bernie, as everyone eventually calls this ebullient, down-to-earth man. So he was compelled to write the story—or part of it—himself. *Outsider in the House* is his account of almost three decades of political struggles and remarkable victories.

Unfortunately, as someone who believes that ideas are more important than personality, Bernie seems uncomfortable writing about himself. He devotes only two and a half pages to his childhood in a lower middle-class Jewish family in Brooklyn and his student involvement in radical '60s politics at the University of Chicago. The book gives almost no information about his wife and family or his occupations out-

side politics.

This is a political autobiography. He structures the story around his 1996 reelection campaign—and weaves in his broader political career through flashbacks. The resulting format is at times confusing, even frustrating, but ultimately it works because it gives a sense of how someone with ideas outside the mainstream can achieve political success.

Bernie started his political career as a familiar stock figure in radical politics: the perennial loser. Just look at his early record as a candidate: 1971 U.S. Senate race, 2 percent of the vote; 1972 Vermont governor's race, 1 percent; 1974 U.S. Senate race, 4 percent; 1976 governor's race, 6 percent.

But a funny thing happened to Bernie on the way to oblivion. In the 1981 race for mayor of Burlington (Vermont's largest city), Bernie put together a coalition of citizens who felt shut out of City Hall: working people, college students and their professors, renters, cops, environmentalists, even tax-weary conservative homeowners. And with 10 votes to spare, he won the election.

With nary a suit in his closet and only two supporters on a 13-member city

council, Bernie assumed his “mandate” and set up mayor's councils on youth, the arts, women, senior citizens, health care and tax reform (to name a few). He saved the city thousands of dollars by breaking old-boy single-source contracting practices. And he started the first Little League for poor neighborhoods.

Just after the election, Bernie put together the Independent Coalition, made up of candidates for alderman from each of the city's wards. The coalition went on to elect a city council that allowed Bernie to further advance his ideas. The new council instituted progressive alternatives to the property tax: a 1 percent room-and-meal tax, a tax increase on commercial and industrial property, new taxes on utilities and cable TV and payments for public safety from “tax-exempt” institutions including the University of Vermont and Medical Center Hospital. The council also established childcare and teen centers, snow removal for the elderly and disabled, a jazz festival and poetry readings.

A radical politician in America rarely has a chance to govern and thus show people that a progressive agenda can have relevance to their lives. But Bernie