# Take Back the Fourth Estate

Why does an expression of commitment to egalitarian values make one feel like an alien in a land saturated with the rhetoric of free expression and democracy? How is it that a fundamentally unequal system of laissez-faire capitalism has become synonymous with democratic practice? Because we lack the vibrant noncommercial mass media outlets that might routinely expose and challenge the fault lines of capitalism and the consumer culture it has come to require.

For many of us, disgust over concentrated mass media ownership has been palpable since at least 1983, when Ben Bagdikian documented the stranglehold of 50 corporations that then constituted *The Media Monopoly*. We have nodded in horror as each successive edition of his seminal study reported such accelerating consolidation that, by its fifth release in 1997, only 10 corporations controlled "almost everything we see, hear and read."

Still, over the past decade, rampant commercialism brought unanticipated consequences: the phenomena of celebrity scandal-mongering masquerading as news and synergistic cross-marketing of media "brands." Sustainable development initiatives, living wage campaigns, anti-sweatshop actions and organized labor receive scant attention—while breathless accounts of advertising wars, HMO profit margins and cyberbusiness deals dominate the front of the business sections.

Think about it: What chance does a progressive agenda—including such goals as universal health care, family-supporting wages and a brake on global warming—have in the current political climate? How do we get Cokie Roberts and Tim Russert to spend Sunday morning discussing the fact that the average CEO now makes 419 times more than the average blue-collar worker rather than the Clintons' house-hunting trip to New York?

Meanwhile, independent publications teeter constantly on the brink of insolvency. Many fail. Feisty pirate radio stations are silenced. If the Pacifica board of directors can be seduced by Madison Avenue's sampling techniques to run roughshod over thousands of KPFA stalwarts, dare we presume that serious structural change is possible?

Robert McChesney still believes that it is. Frankly, if we hold out any hope for authentic democracy, we should take him at his word and act right away. Everybody complains about the media. McChesney has the audacity and imagination to insist that we might actually do something about it. In his most recent analysis of the media at century's end, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times*, McChesney lays out a four-part agenda for media reform that can inspire, orient and help to organize the millions who long for a genuinely democratic fourth estate:

- **Building noncommercial media.** Give your money, time and creativity to strengthen fledgling or foundering efforts. McChesney exhorts foundations, labor organizations and others in the position to channel significant resources to bolster these efforts. Urge Congress to consider tax credits for donations to alternative media makers, such as the Independent Press Association and its dozens of member publications.
- **Genuinely public broadcasting.** Existing national, regional and local citizen organizations should take a leaf from the KPFA battle and advocate for democratic management and local control.

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- **Regulation.** The Steal This Radio project of the New York Free Media Alliance has begun to model this tactic. With the help of the Center for Constitutional Rights and the National Lawyers Guild, they have forced the FCC to consider licensing low-power "micro-radio" frequencies.
- **Antitrust action.** McChesney recommends specific new legislation, an antitrust statute directed at breaking up media conglomerates. Lively debates about similar initiatives are well underway in Australia and New Zealand.

Media restructuring, like recent parallel efforts to dismantle the corrupt campaign finance system, will not result organically just from accounts of mainstream media's consistently egregious behavior. Such evidence is necessary and—thanks to the excellent work of FAIR and the Institute for Public Accuracy, among others—available. But Rupert Murdoch, Sumner Redstone and Mickey Mouse will not be embarrassed into democratic transformation.

How do we proceed? McChesney's recommendations are straightforward, but they require self-conscious, dedicated action. Progressive political and community organizations need to adopt them and get to work.

**Beth Schulman**

# Debt Row

**By David Moberg**

**WASHINGTON**

Under pressure from a global grassroots campaign, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank have launched an expanded program to reduce the debts of the world's poorest countries. As the two organizations met in late September for their annual meetings, member governments pledged most of the money to get things started. Doubling the scale of the existing program, the move eventually could relieve $27 billion from "heavily indebted poor countries" (HIPC), and would require the IMF and World Bank to work with the debtor countries on strategies to reduce poverty. The program would still require poor countries to submit to modified IMF "structural adjustment" dictates that typically have made the poor more miserable.

But the Jubilee 2000 movement and its allies want debts of the poorest countries cancelled outright. The new plan is "a step forward," says Seth Amgott, a spokesman for Oxfam, an international anti-poverty group, "but it doesn't go far enough."

The action, which followed a decision last June by the G-7 richest nations to increase their financial contributions to debt relief, implicitly acknowledges the failure of the HIPC initiative started three years ago. Although the IMF claims progress in the HIPCs, a recent study by the Preamble Center, a Washington think tank, concluded that African countries following the IMF mandates have experienced lower economic growth than other developing countries, cut spending on health care, education and sanitation, and suffered from a rising burden of debt. On average, HIPCs spend 30 percent of government revenue on debt payments. Even with the expanded program, a country like Guyana will see its annual debt payments drop only modestly, from $72 million a year to $63 million—still an intolerable drain.

The IMF has agreed to fund its share of the new program through a convoluted plan to revalue a small share of its gold reserves, now valued at less than one-fifth the market price. This scheme also will give the IMF some funding for its controversial structural adjustment lending. But the elaborate revaluation charade also reflects how resolving poor countries' debts is, at one level, a giant accounting shell game.

The 41 HIPCs supposedly owe about $200 billion to various governments, banks and multilateral institutions. But the market value of that debt is only $24 billion, according to Jubilee 2000. The poor, who never benefited from the loans often made to corrupt dictators, are left with bills they can never pay. But governments keep "rolling over" and enlarging their debt: Two-thirds of the new debt assumed by sub-Saharan African countries over the past decade simply repay old debt and unpaid interest.

The Clinton administration has asked Congress to appropriate nearly $1 billion over three years to cancel the poorest countries' debts to the United States and to pay for its own debts to international institutions. A bill sponsored by House Banking Committee chairman Jim Leach (R-Iowa) would largely ratify the IMF "enhanced HIPC" initiative. It would also require that the United States use the money saved by canceling its loans for human development.

But several other bills—co-sponsored by liberal Democrats and conservative, anti-IMF Republicans—call for outright debt cancellation. These alternative bills would withhold either U.S. approval of IMF gold "sales" or future IMF funding until the international institutions also cancel HIPCs' debts. These strategies are designed not only to cancel debts completely, but also to keep the IMF from imposing its policies on poor countries.

How much would it cost citizens of rich countries to cancel the debts of the 52 poorest countries, freeing that money for initiatives ranging from health care and education to building roads and protecting water resources? About a penny a day per person over the next two decades, according to Jubilee 2000. The payback would be immense, from the moral reward of reduced human misery to the crass prospect of new markets. But canceling debts would take away creditors' power over the policies of developing countries and challenge the twisted mentality of global bankers, the two biggest barriers to elementary justice. ■

**Terry LaBan**