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REVIEW ESSAY[1]

Mediating Crisis

Eric Alterman, *What Liberal Media? The Truth about* Bias *and the News*, New York: Basic Books, 2003, 322 pp.

Todd Gitlin, *Media Unlimited: How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms Our Lives*, New York: Henry Holt & Co, 2002, 242 pp.

Robert W. McChesney, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times*, New York: The New Press, 2000 (paperback, with a new preface), xxxvi + 427 pp. (originally published by University of Illinois Press, 1999)

Given the principal role of communications technology in reconfiguring the global economy, we might read media trends as early expressions of more general social and political tendencies. Recent approaches to media criticism have diagnosed this as an era of crisis. We hear: *The production and distribution of information is today more concentrated than ever before in the hands of powerful megacorporations. This concentration impoverishes public discourse and facilitates wholesale colonization of consciousness, as territories not overrun by marketing messages and entertainment products rapidly approach zero.* This approach has much to recommend it, and examining a few of its manifestations might suggest productive ways to navigate the crisis.

While recent mergers plainly demonstrate a dramatic trend towards consolidation and integration of media outlets, posing this move as one of crisis often points to the present condition as one of lapsed democracy, implicitly celebrating a mythic past of meaningful citizen participation and pronounced competition between information providers. But the narrative need not be so romantic. We might instead read the crisis as the latest challenge to the myth of liberal individuality in an age of capital acquisition. Insofar as media criticism agonizes over the threat to individual consciousness posed by a torrent of marketing and entertainment messages, examinations of the crisis might offer critiques of the individualist myths of autonomy and authenticity. As such, they might demonstrate not only that we are no longer autonomous or authentic, but that we never were.

The crisis narrative is a familiar one in the literatures of the left; its recent applications to the state of mass communication are part of an honored tradition. Invoking a crisis and sense of urgency, they declare that we are at a crossroads, and the resolution of the current crisis will spell either success or failure for the future of American and global democracy. This is a big claim, and each book succeeds in making this valuable point.

The Nation columnist and MSNBC.com blogger Eric Alterman approaches the

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crisis from a journalist's perspective, and his focus is exclusively on journalism. His project in *What Liberal Media? The Truth about* Bias *and the News* is to discredit claims of a liberal bias in the news. He argues that news coverage and analysis in the US today has seen a dramatic shift rightward, and that the epithet "liberal media" only makes sense in relation to an increasingly conservative culture. Rightwing commentators identify liberal bias, he explains, because the media has not drifted as far right as public opinion, party platforms, and government policy.

The 13 chapters which make up the book are of varying quality. While Alterman's argument is sound, well documented, and frequently accompanied by some very compelling evidence, he often lapses into a rudimentary and irresponsible he-said-she-said school of argumentation, asking us to scoff at what he takes to be obvious distortions. The repeated directions to imagine how the media would have handled particular decisions had they been made by Clinton instead of Bush II and the extended and tortured attempt to rescue Al Gore from his reputation as a liar are particularly frustrating. These sections of anecdotal, speculative, and righteous style of argumentation are not likely to be convincing to any audience, be they sympathetic or hostile to the general thesis of the book, though they may be fun to cheer. It is unfortunate that Alterman's most powerful evidence such as the paucity of media coverage of events like the 1996 Telecommunications Act receives so much less playing time than the polemics.

Though he immediately warns how a focus on individual decision makers obscures the real machinations of the production of news, the book unfortunately ends up being largely about individuals. The sections on rightwing ideological institutions focus on the careers of Charles Murray, Rupert Murdoch, and bona fide nutcase Richard Melon Scaife. The radio and internet sections are about Rush Limbaugh and Matt Drudge. The chapter on economic bias is more about endorsement deals between personalities and corporations than about "the media's love affair with the stock market" (p. 123). Though the television chapter admits to the ridiculous though unstated "qualifications" for punditry ("not being too fat or too ugly; the ability to speak in short sentences and project an engaging personality; and a willingness to speak knowingly about matters about which one knows little or nothing"; p. 32), the chapter is largely a dissection of specific pundits such as George Will, Bill O'Reilly, and Robert Novak. While Alterman effectively argues that these *de facto* qualifications lend themselves to the bombast and ire endemic to contemporary conservatism, he unfortunately stops short of arguing that they are inherently conservative in categorically shunning detailed, systemic, or historical analysis. Because there is remarkably little here about the organization of media as a profit industry, about the role of advertising dollars and formatting decisions in determining news content, or about the functional compatibility of infotainment and conservative politics, Alterman is not wrong, he just misses the big picture.

Despite this, the book has significant merits. Its extended focus on what he calls the "punditocracy" is valuable for bringing attention to the very powerful instruments wielded by analysts and commentators. Trifurcating the media into avowedly conservative, mainstream, and avowedly liberal, he contests the myth of a media monolith and also contrasts the ideological commitments of leftwing and rightwing ideology apparatuses. Revealing the rightwing as more vociferous, organized, consistent, and well funded, Alterman proceeds to offer some

interesting genealogies of ideological institutions such as the Heritage Foundation and *The Weekly Standard*.

These genealogies lay the foundation for Alterman's most significant argument. In short, he explains that the media have moved to the right because the right, to borrow his own sports analogy, are much better at "working the refs." Demonstrating greater solidarity and organization than their left-leaning counterparts, rightists are more vocal in calling the media out to support their causes, in speaking up when they do not approve, and in accusing the media of bias. Attending to the squeaky wheels, the media drifted rightward. Blatantly partisan organs like Fox News are important, he convincingly claims, for helping to shift the center to a position in which we can get media personalities such as G. Gordon Liddy, Rush Limbaugh, and Ann Coulter, who receives Alterman's most acrimonious assaults. Their "liberal" counterparts, he suggests, could only be imagined as Noam Chomsky, *The Nation* columnist Alexander Cockburn (who receives his own share of Alterman's venom), Vanessa Redgrave, and Fidel Castro.

Though understated, the book's most redeeming feature might be the light it sheds on the production of rightwing citizens through the vertically and horizontally integrated ideology industry. From think tanks to media outlets to pundits, Alterman details not a vast conspiracy so much as a flourishing industry in producing and distributing pro-market ideology. His book serves as an extended discussion of the importance of what Althusser called Ideological State Apparatuses, seemingly quite aware that the dissatisfactions and contradictions of capitalism must be vigorously and aggressively maintained or concealed. Not only Fox News and the Heritage Foundation, but also CNN and the *New York Times* provide the interpretive metrics through which we will comprehend our lives, and these metrics are fundamentally pro-American, pro-market, and anything but progressive.

As diagnosed by Alterman, the crisis inheres in a powerful minority forcing a cultural shift rightward, with the media as its instrument. Unfortunately, he ultimately declares this to be a crisis of media, not one of cultural ideology. Exerting so much effort to dissect particular media personalities, he takes away from his own contribution of attending to the vast industries committed to producing conservative subjects. The subjects of Alterman's world are held against their will in conservative ideology, and the crisis is locatable in a particular profession. As such, he ultimately understates the depth of the crisis.

In *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times*, Robert McChesney deploys the crisis narrative to demonstrate how media technologies have become an impediment rather than a boon to democracy. He claims that recent technological developments do not provide any substantive break from the model of media growth prevailing since the introduction of radio in the 1920s. In contrast to the celebratory logic typically attached to it, digital communication has made it easier and more imperative that media giants consolidate and cooperate; new technologies are leading to less rather than more competition as the putatively decentering logic of the web is accompanied by the most awesome capital mergers in history. As this concentration of power in socially unaccountable hands constitutes a profound threat to democracy, he argues that media reform must be a point on any progressive movement's platform.

This argument is not only incisive and timely, but is also exhaustively

researched and documented. In the 1389 footnotes—most of them containing multiple citations—which are appended to the barely 300 pages of text, McChesney offers a wealth of evidence to irrefutably demonstrate his point. Unfortunately, the barrage of footnotes can become distracting and burdensome. So powerfully argued and heavily documented, the book is certainly slated to enter the canon of history and political economy of the media, and will appeal to various audiences including teachers and students of the media, grassroots activists and critics, and progressives looking for ammunition for the next family gathering. The Media Education Foundation has recently released *Rich Media, Poor Democracy* on VHS and DVD.

Broken into two parts, the book examines first the politics and then the history of US media management. Part I discusses the horizontal integration (concentration) and vertical integration (conglomeration) of media since the 1970s, detailing how media empires work to create "synergies" that allow, for example, a corporation's television production holdings to leverage profits by promoting its own movies, music, video games, books, retail outlets, and companion networks. McChesney argues that while broadcasting media were, and should be, geared towards public service, these synergies have rendered media fundamentally and almost exclusively a commercial endeavor. Admitting that markets would be democratic if we had them, he protests that what we have instead is a collection of extremely powerful and oligopolistic megacorporations able to secure favorable legislation by hiding behind a pseudo-democratic rhetoric of consumer choice.

These are the components of the media crisis as McChesney diagnoses it: concentration, conglomeration, and hypercommercialism. Like Alterman, he identifies critical journalism as a great casualty of this transition to a profit media system, though he reflects most extensively on the decline of public broadcasting which he identifies, along with free public education, as a hallmark of a democratic society. This focus, unfortunately, betrays the shortcoming with his conception of the crisis. His argument turns on the infrequently stated, but never defended, assumption that journalism and broadcasting *used to be* public services, not driven by the interests of capital. Though this assumption provides immediate rhetorical force, it is upset by his own admission that this service orientation was never more than an impotent illusion.[2]

His argument, then, is threatened by its reliance upon a forced nostalgia for an idyllic past of responsible media heroically defending the public interest, making no mention of how media have always been implicated in producing consenting subjects. While the trends in media ownership and control are indeed frightening and real, his suggestion that we have lost some degree of autonomy and democracy rings a bit hollow to anybody skeptical of such romantic histories. I see this occasional nostalgia as a missed opportunity. Though the commercial transparency that McChesney identifies in "The Lion King" and contemporary professional sports (pp. 39, 45) might be cause for alarm or

[2] Contrast "The notion of public service … is in rapid retreat if not total collapse" (p. 77) with "From the outset, it was determined that we would have a public system, but it would be severely handicapped … In short, public broadcasting was set up in such a way as to ensure that it was feeble, dependent, and marginal" (p. 248).

disappointment, they might also be merely the most recent and visible manifestations of the colonizing power of capital.

A second consequence of McChesney's nostalgia is evident in his chapter on digital communication and the internet. Arguing that citizens must resist commercialization of the internet, he builds upon the assumption that Americans generally share this goal. But while he provides passing citations to studies showing that Americans would prefer an internet without advertising, this does not indicate preference for a noncommercial web. Given that citizens also do not want to pay for access to online search engines or local newspapers, and also given the degree of shopping that occurs online, it is hard to read McChesney's statement as convincing evidence that people want a noncommercial internet.

This runs a greater risk than lack of evidence. McChesney argues that the web *should* remain noncommercial and nonprofit *if* public deliberation endorses it, while he simultaneously argues that democracy *demands* it. Refusing to entertain the possibility and, let's face it, probability that public deliberation would lead to a decision to keep the web almost entirely commercial, he misses what might be the greater crisis: not that America does not have a democratic media system, but that Americans do not seem to want one. He points to various fringe groups as evidence of widespread disenchantment with the concentration and conglomeration of media, but taken together these are a tiny minority that demonstrate little about a popular will. While I understand the political value in highlighting these movements, the argument is nonetheless disappointing.[3]

The history that forms Part II of the book tells of the emergence of commercial broadcasting as we know it. Beginning in the late 1920s with the development of radio and interest groups such as the National Association of Broadcasters, National Committee on Education by Radio, and the National Advisory Council on Radio and Education, he guides us through Supreme Court cases on commercial speech and broadcasting regulations, and legislative milestones such as the Communications Act of 1934 which created the FCC and the Telecommunications Act of 1996 which relaxed ownership restrictions on media.

Of particular value here beyond the amassed reservoir of citations and historical information is a lucid and explicit critique of the consumerist model of citizenship peddled by neoliberalism. Emphasizing the tradition of media activism in the US, McChesney reminds the reader that democracy means access to decision making bodies that award use and control of public resources such as analog and digital broadcasting spectra. This is an effective plea to consider broadcasting issues from the perspective of citizens rather than consumers. So while he concludes his extended discussion of the travails of public broadcasting by admitting that this domain is comparatively "small potatoes," he defends his use of the example for representing an important principle: public control of public resources (p. 255). His concern is that the use of public airwaves for profit should be in question in any society that calls itself democratic, and this section of the book endeavors to give ammunition, incentive, and inspiration to force these issues back on the table. Despite his misleading suggestion that a strong

[3] McChesney also declares that, if given a democratic choice, Americans would elect a socialist government (pp. 283-284). Making these claims as if they are true by definitional fiat (democratic choice must be socialist), he ignores that socialist consciousness—just like possessive individualism—must be produced and nurtured.

commitment to public broadcasting was once the norm, he succeeds admirably here.

In contrast to McChesney's fortress of footnotes held together with text as mortar, Todd Gitlin's *Media Unlimited: How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms Our Lives* is quite obviously written for a non-academic audience. His references, a fraction of McChesney's or even Alterman's, are merely accumulated in the last 30 pages of the book and are identified not by reference number but by page number.

Gitlin's focus is also distinct. While Alterman focuses exclusively on commercial journalism and McChesney concentrates on public broadcasting, Gitlin writes about cultural productions writ large, most of which are avowedly entertainment media. Recognizing that entertainment media influences us more than does news programming, Gitlin focuses on how media generates and manipulates the desires and abilities of subjects.

In his subtitle, Gitlin introduces a new term that he will use to describe the media—the *torrent*. In explaining this aquatic metaphor that obviously evokes Hobbes, Gitlin makes one of the first valuable points of the book: while we tend to talk about mass media as singular and monolithic, the term "media" both is and should be *plural*. Gitlin's new terminology is intended to embrace the vastness and multiplicity of the force of media.

Certainly the most daring and perhaps the most rewarding aspect of *Media Unlimited* is its focus on the demand side of the equation. Questioning the adequacy of the Marxist notion of commodity fetishism and also the Weberian focus on rationality, Gitlin turns to the work of Georg Simmel, whom he thinks is more attuned to the ways in which consumption provides fleeting and placatory satisfaction in a money economy. Seeking experiences through commodity consumption, he argues, we lose the ability to have experiences unmediated by money, thus opening ourselves to a perpetual pursuit of ephemeral pleasures and, thus, unlimited media. We have arrived at the present crisis not because an avaricious and powerful elite have compelled us to listen to their noises and view their images, but because we have come "to experience, and crave, particular kinds of feelings—disposable ones" (p. 41).

In what amounts to an almost direct critique of the media empires argument employed by McChesney, Gitlin posits that our landscapes and soundscapes are overrun by marketing messages because we find comfort in consumption—because we *enjoy* it. In contrast to the joylessness that he sees in traditional Marxism, he wants to welcome this domain of pleasure or at least admit to its appeal. He suggests that, as critics, we do ourselves a disservice by focusing exclusively on the supply side of the crisis without recognizing how megacorporate marketers produce consumers who actively pursue the narcotizing sweetness of the culture industry. As everything solid melts into air, we are provided with the "greatest and most spectacular show on earth" (p. 117). Criticism cannot compete with this spectacle; as a form of control, fleeting satisfaction is much more effective than conventional models of authority and surveillance.[4]

To account for the demand for the torrent, Gitlin develops a typology of

[4] Responding directly to Foucault and "university trendhoppers" fond of his model of panoptic society, Gitlin claims that control today comes in the form of a panoply of inputs: "Big Brother had no chance against niche media and personal choice" (p. 46).

audiences based around eight "styles of navigation"—including fans, critics, paranoids, exhibitionists, ironists, jammers, secessionists, and abolitionists. Focusing on how information is consumed, not merely produced or distributed, he suggests that modes of reception are essential to understanding the operations of the media. He thus asks the reader to recognize that the ways in which the messages we receive, either receptively or reluctantly, are crucial for media criticism.

What this means is that comparing the Americanization of global culture to imperialism ignores the fact that people *like* American culture. The standard attacks on the gratuitous sex and violence that dominate the global cinema tend to release critics from asking the more difficult questions of why people hunger for graphic sex and violence in their music, movies, and television. These questions are more difficult not only because they are more complicated, but because they run the risk of blaming swimmers for the existence of the torrent. But Gitlin wants to ask these questions in order to examine how the crisis operates within the very desires of its subjects.

Consistent with Simmel's rhetoric of the body, Gitlin uses the language of intoxication to discuss our reception. Comparing the torrent to a drug—a delivery device for adrenaline (pp. 91, 195)—he invokes Marx's statement about opiates and suggests a radical and not merely transitory dependence upon the products of the culture industry. From within this metaphor, we are compelled to wonder about drug treatment programs and substitutes, about the torrent as a public health issue rather than merely a moral dereliction or individual infirmity, and recognize that we cannot ask addicts to quit cold turkey. Unless we want to repeat the unmitigated failure of the so-called war on drugs, we should probably find a better approach.

While he at times suggests a fundamental shift in human relations with the emergence of the media torrent in which there is no escape from the steady din of marketing messages, Gitlin also recognizes that life before the torrent was not some idyllic world of autonomous subjects freely choosing silence, education, or entertainment. With some meager empirics, he suggests it is merely the speed and volume of the torrent that distinguishes it from our input systems of earlier years, and traces this increase to a changing face of labor relations in the US. While early 20th-century labor struggles fought for limitations on the amount of time spent on the job, subsequent labor struggles have concentrated on higher wages. So the increased number of hours spent under the gaze of the culture industry replaces not so-called free time, but rather work time under the watchful eye of the supervisor. While he identifies the torrent as a profound threat to the possibility of freedom and democracy, Gitlin refrains from suggesting that this threat is new, or that before this threat we were free and uncoerced. Rather, we inhabited different, slower modes of subjection. Sacrificing time for money at work, we sacrifice autonomy for entertainment at home. A more effective if significantly less gripping approach to the torrent than McChesney's, he suggests that this is not a new form of discipline, but merely a more efficient one.

These are notable strengths of Gitlin's book. Its weaknesses come largely in the realm of rigor. His argumentation is at times sloppy. His concluding section on formulas of torrential entertainment (westerns, action movies, and cartoons) is not particularly useful, with distinctions that are less than clear and categories

that seem somewhat arbitrary. His examples are often quite forced and dated. Disney, for example, is represented here by Mickey Mouse, an emblem hard to recognize today. They are also utterly conventional and unimpressive: isn't Disney an unreasonably easy target? Gitlin also has an unfortunate habit of presenting figures that are apparently intended to shock us, but which are difficult to situate. For example, though he states that the US media exports totaled almost $80 billion in 1999, he compares this with nothing, leaving the reader to wonder how extraordinary this figure is, what other industries export, how much Americans consume—how, in short, to interpret the statistic.

The nostalgia for a purer model of media that permeates McChesney's and Alterman's books is regrettable. This is particularly so because it draws upon a larger and more menacing nostalgia for a model of individual autonomy that denies the cultural production of subjectivity. Pining for the time before mass media in which our consciousness was pure and self-determined, relatively independent from the cacophonous noises of social and intellectual life, they disappointingly default to a traditional individualism, somewhat conspiratorially identifying a sinister They interfering with the democratic We that, if left to our own devices, would spontaneously (re)emerge.

As such, McChesney and Alterman emerge from their narratives extremely pessimistic about the possibility for democracy, retaining little more than a general faith in humanity. In romanticizing our past, they fail to capitalize on a political resource afforded the left by media saturation. While they despair at the crisis in media, one might instead read the present situation as a becoming visible of a crisis formerly concealed, thrusting the coercions of capital into a demystifying light. In fact, the torrent's renewed transparency might be revealing how the liberal ideal of autonomy was compromised by market forces from the get-go. If the state of media affairs today renders the social production of subjectivity visible for all to see, then perhaps this state is cause for celebration rather than resignation. Maybe this is not the ultimate triumph of global capitalism through the media, but is instead the dawn before we realize that consciousness was from the beginning a social product, and that individualism was from the outset produced and marketed by the power of capital.

Gitlin says substantially less regarding this issue than Alterman or McChesney. But in arguing that more face time with the media represents a shifting of our domination from the workplace to home, he acknowledges that our consciousness was always saturated with social powers. Focusing on our subjection in a realm of consumption rather than production, Gitlin repeatedly uses the image of the screen to demonstrate that the distinction between our saturated consciousness of today and our saturated consciousness of yesterday is merely one of technology and visibility.

One value of crisis texts such as these is that they reveal the myth of individualism. For the torrent is not new, as Gitlin suggests; digital communication is merely the latest and fastest set of directive inputs. The fact that it is so blatant today means merely that the myth is that much more transparent.

Predictably, each author's working assumptions inform their prescriptions for addressing the crisis. Given his profession, it should come as no surprise that Alterman dedicates his short concluding chapter entitled "An Honorable Profession" to explaining that journalists bear responsibility for the situation. Summoning "heroic," "noble," and "genuine" journalists who rigorously probe

issues and present compelling and upsetting material, he betrays a commitment to a notion of autonomy that is hard to defend given that journalists are no less than anybody else inundated by the torrent.[5] He suggests that journalists and pundits bear the responsibility for public ideas and preferences, and that bad media explains citizen ignorance. He invokes a model of forgotten journalistic responsibility in which reporters are not neutral, but are open about their biases and unintimidated by rightwing cries of liberal bias. Unburdening himself of the most severe elements of the crisis, he reverts to a strong individualism, calling for an exercise of autonomy that his own analysis would seem to preclude.

The series of proposals with which McChesney closes his book are significantly more substantial. McChesney advocates two broad types of activism. First, in the realm of direct media reform and production, he calls for the development of strong labor unions for journalists and broadcasters which can offer the support and opportunities which foster the desire and possibility for the sort of journalistic heroism to which Alterman casually appeals. This demonstrates an understanding of the institutional production of agency that Alterman's proposals ignore. McChesney also endorses the work of media watchdogs such as Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting. But he rejects the grassroots notion of participatory "public journalism" which he thinks ignores the structural incentives to produce sensationalistic news and also the "media literacy movement" (of which Gitlin seems a part) for ultimately blaming consumers for the sorry state of commercial journalism. Instead, he endorses local media such as "microradio broadcasting" which he claims "has blossomed in the current political environment" (p. 302). Given his global focus throughout the book, his critique of public journalism, and his failure to explain how such micro-broadcasts might compete with the media monsters currently dominating the field, this last is a strange proposal.

But McChesney points to a second, more important, space for activism: the policy arena. Quite active himself in this arena, McChesney advocates building and supporting nonprofit and noncommercial print media, and also supporting public broadcasting, government regulation, and antitrust enforcement. More generally, McChesney emphasizes multiple times that a media reform movement is only possible insofar as it is a component of a strong left political movement which can put it on the public agenda. Media reform, he declares, can only be meaningful if it is a part of a larger movement "to shift power from the few to the many" (p. 3). Of course, given that media reform is necessary to teach this lesson, and we must learn this lesson to pursue media reform, we inhabit a familiar paradox. Taking a lesson from capital, however, we might try to see this as a synergy rather than a paradox, exploring ways to get these projects to promote rather than compete with each other.

Though I am generally suspicious of demand-side explanations which suggest responsible consumption as the cure for exploited labor, environmental degradation, or "false consciousness," Gitlin's contribution is useful for diagnosing the shortcomings of critiques such as Alterman's and McChesney's. While the latter two implicitly invoke a responsibility among journalists to provide citizens with the information necessary to make democratic decisions, they

[5] McChesney has a similar passage on slain journalists, the noble and sacrificing heroes that Alterman appeals to (p. 117).

imply that consumers want this information. Gitlin recommends examining not only how news coverage fails to stimulate a democratic imagination, but also why a sound byte, sensationalistic media format is so appealing. This approach challenges conventional attributions of responsibility which simplistically blame reporters (or perhaps owners) for the miserable state of television, radio, and print news sources. It therefore suggests proposals for reform that would be distinct from the traditional organize-and-revolt theme of the left. Lack of ability is not the only barrier to effective resistance; there is also, at this point, a pronounced lack of desire. As Gitlin explains, the crisis is much deeper than one of supply. Not only are these antidemocratic times, Americans continue to learn to abide them. Of course, admitting to Gitlin's diagnosis of the depth of the crisis in no way contradicts any of McChesney's and Alterman's identifications of the antidemocratic organization of wealth and information in the news industry.

But then what? When Gitlin does address resistance, he denigrates the "fugitive publics" as sprung up, for example, in Seattle in 1999. While they are better than no public at all, he argues, they imitate the torrential speed of global capital with an ephemerality that prevents them from doing the work of democracy. One element of the present crisis, he continues, is a loss of faith in a stable and common collective subject. Belittling the achievements and sacrifices of globalization protesters, he conveys that he is himself not fully aware of the volume of the torrent, and how its codes and apparatuses may be implicated in the very possibilities for resistance.

At the forefront of the changing face of capital, media technologies demonstrate tendencies present throughout the global economy. Diagnosing the crisis in media can help us diagnose the state of crisis in contemporary democracy more generally. While it is tempting to expose the torrent's influence over our lives and conclude that its malevolence consists in robbing us of our natural autonomy, this invokes a crippling and romantic nostalgia for a mythic era. A more progressive approach might be to point to media saturation as a visible demonstration of the insidious myths of liberal individualism and to use it as a starting point promoting a more responsible organization of wealth and information. For while these crisis narratives might shock readers into submission or incite them into an impotent rage, they might also be pointing to exploitable points of discord. If the media crisis is a significant symptom of a deeper one, then we might read books such as these as demonstrating the increasing difficulty in maintaining illusions of democracy.

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