

8-2-2018

America's Battle for Media Democracy: The Triumph of Corporate Libertarianism and the Future of Media. By Victor Pickard.

Brian Dolber

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/democratic-communication>

Recommended Citation

Dolber, Brian (2018) "America's Battle for Media Democracy: The Triumph of Corporate Libertarianism and the Future of Media. By Victor Pickard.," *Democratic Communiqué*: Vol. 27 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/democratic-communication/vol27/iss1/6>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Democratic Communiqué by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.

Book Review

America's Battle for Media Democracy: The Triumph of Corporate Libertarianism and the Future of Media. By Victor Pickard. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014, 259p. (hardback) ISBN 9781107038332. US List \$85.00.

The migration of readers and advertisers from print to digital platforms, coupled with a commonsense belief in the United States that the government has little if any role to play in ensuring a free, democratic, and vibrant public sphere, have produced crises in journalism of both economics and legitimacy. Critical perspectives often attribute the ascent of these free market ideas and the decline of civic engagement to the rise of the neoliberal consensus in the 1980s. But in the tradition of the “historical turn” in political economy (McChesney 2007, 99), Victor Pickard’s first monograph, *America’s Battle for Media Democracy: The Triumph of Corporate Libertarianism and the Future of Media*, offers a compelling intervention: our media system’s current failures have emerged out of structural relationships and philosophical perspectives that were ingrained during the early postwar era.

Seamlessly blending intellectual and social history with contemporary media criticism, *America’s Battle* offers an account of the rise of this consensus—what the author terms “corporate libertarianism.” As Pickard describes it, corporate libertarianism is “an ideological framework that attaches individual freedoms to corporate entities and assumes that an unregulated market is the most efficient and therefore the most socially desirable means for allocating important resources” (5). By the late 1940s, systems of self-regulation with moderate government intervention had been adopted in both U.S. broadcasting and journalism. A loosely defined “social responsibility” ethos within a commercial, for-profit

context emerged. Through a Gramscian approach, however, Pickard demonstrates that this outcome was not inevitable, but highly debated and contested. As he argues, “a three-pronged assault on commercial media led by grassroots activists, progressive policy makers and everyday American listeners and readers” developed against the backdrop of the waning New Deal culture in the 1940s (3).

Pickard’s narrative is engaging, well organized, and rigorously researched. *America’s Battle* consists of an introduction, seven substantive chapters, and a conclusion. He consulted a dozen collections of federal and personal records, as well as a broad swath of newspapers, periodicals, and trade publications from the era. By weaving together a tapestry of bright, archival material, Pickard illustrates the overlapping “structural, ideological, racial and commercial” critiques of both broadcasting (Chapter 1) and journalism (Chapter 5), that were, so to speak, in the ether (16). Adjacent chapters show how policy makers, intellectuals, and activists offered different conceptions of how to structure our media system in ways that would suit a democratic society. Chapter 7 explains how these struggles culminated in what Pickard terms “the postwar settlement for American media” (190). The book concludes with a discussion about how this history may point towards ways to think about the contemporary crisis in journalism through the lens of market failure.

America’s Battle charts the rise of a progressive bloc within the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) under the leadership of New Dealers James Fly and Clifford Durr (Chapter 2). In conjunction with critiques from labor, civil rights groups, and the broader public, these men were empowered to draft the Blue Book, which outlined strict public service requirements for commercial broadcasters (Chapter 3), and they fought to restrict corporate editorializing on the air through the maintenance of the Mayflower Doctrine (Chapter 4). As the New Deal gave way to the Cold War, the broadcasting industry countered these efforts through the pervasive tactic of red-baiting, working to define Americanism in corporate libertarian terms. Similarly, Pickard details the story of the Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press (Chapter 6), with particular attention to the radical critiques levied against the commercial press by the poet and intellectual Archibald MacLeish. MacLeish’s efforts to draft a report that put forward a social democratic interpretation of the First Amendment were squandered by institutional and ideological pressures similar to those faced by Fly and Durr.

In Chapter 7, Pickard concludes that “both the Blue Book and the Hutchins Commission followed a four-stage pattern”: they originated as movements, generated progressive policy proposals, suffered counter-attacks, and ultimately ended in settlements that favored industry (192). The resulting “postwar settlement” for U.S. media solidified the notion that media should remain self-regulated, and it ingrained a negative vision of the First Amendment—one that favors commercial media’s “freedom *from*” government over “freedom *for*” audiences and citizens.

These new normative assumptions left structural reform of the media system off the table.

Here, Pickard makes an interesting historiographic intervention, pointing towards a long neoliberalism that sees media policymaking as the starting point for a larger trend that dominated commonsense notions of government regulation later in the 20th century. Reviewing media policymaking from the 1950s through the 1990s, he argues that never again in the 20th century was a social democratic vision for media taken seriously within elite circles. While such a view minimizes the power of the New Left radical movements and the critiques of the advertising industry that resided within the Federal Trade Commission through the 1970s (Niesen 2012), perhaps an early lock on the commercial media system limited the potential of later social movements and efforts.

Refusing to leave readers with a decline narrative, Pickard shines a light on our past to help us think about how to build a brighter future and address our current crises. "The time has arrived," he concludes, "for a renegotiated social contract" (231). Taking a critical perspective on some of the shortcomings of the 1940s movement, Pickard suggests that we may learn from the mistakes of generations past. Perhaps most compellingly, he argues that elite reformers were too detached from the social movements of the day. But a more central concern for Pickard is the development of a social democratic critique that sees the need for policy to guard media as public goods from market failure. Such a critique can offer an optimism of the will as we address the failures of journalism and work to build a democratic Internet.

Through what organized structures might citizens articulate this critique? Pickard points to the outpouring of public comments around media ownership rules, network neutrality protections, and Internet piracy bills as evidence that the social democratic critique may resonate once again. Such actions, though, cannot translate into political change on their own. The organizations of the 1940s that were able to articulate themselves to the New Deal state—labor unions and civil rights organizations—have been all but eviscerated, or they have become shells of themselves with little connection to membership. Importantly, key components of both the labor and civil rights movements have argued against network neutrality protections on corporate libertarian grounds. While the Internet and social media allow for the efficient signing of petitions and 'slacktivism,' the structures of dissent, and perhaps their efficacy, have changed dramatically since the postwar settlement. Further, a dramatic growth in economic inequality has accompanied this decline in democratic participation, nearly locking out the public from political discussion. Pointing not just to the market failure within media, but more broadly, to the failure of the market economy may be an essential component in reopening the debates of the 1940s. Indeed, as Pickard notes, many of the liberal reformers were too cautious. Their timidity did not benefit them politically, as

even the most modest critiques prompted red-baiting from the corporate class and their political allies.

Like all top-notch critical research, Victor Pickard opens up new possible areas of inquiry for scholars and activists. He has produced an excellent monograph that is sure to stimulate important discussions and debates among media historians, political theorists, policy makers, and movement strategists. Engaging and intellectually rich, *America's Battle* connects the conflicts at the FCC and the Hutchins Commission to larger philosophical concerns that remain salient in contemporary political debates: positive liberty vs. negative liberty, social democracy vs. libertarianism. Written with clarity and meticulous detail, it should be required reading in graduate and advanced undergraduate courses that deal with these topics.

References

- McChesney, Robert W. *Communication revolution: Critical junctures and the future of media*. New York: New Press, 2007.
- Niesen, Molly C. "Crisis of consumerism: Advertising, activism and the battle over the U.S. Federal Trade Commission, 1969-1980." Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 2013.

Brian Dolber
Assistant Professor of Mass Communication
SUNY College at Oneonta