

# Media For the "Well-fed" Starves the Rest of Us

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*"A community will evolve  
only when its people control their means of communication."*

— Frantz Fanon<sup>1</sup>

The day Elian Gonzalez was removed by federal marshals from his Miami relatives' home, between 150 and 200 Iraqi children died as a result of the U.S.-driven sanctions. Yet the media debate over Elian's "seizure," from news and talk shows to articles and letters to the editor, far exceeded the amount of corporate media ink and broadcasts devoted to coverage of the sanctions and their effects over the last nine years.

Who has the power to define the news? No matter the issue—trade and foreign policy, welfare, health care, environmental protection, military spending, institutional racism, sexism, or citizen protests—the root question is: who has the power to determine what gets covered?

In the oligarchic republic of the United States, a few people hiding behind their corporate shields hold the power to define, to set policies and priorities, without the meaningful involvement of the vast majority of people. It's no surprise that their decisions benefit the already well served, lacking diverse input and participation. It's no wonder that we struggle to achieve democracy, rather than practicing and honing it.

The few people who define our government, economy, institutions, values and culture, are the political heirs of those who established this republic. Some 55 white men, whom political scientist James McGregor Burns calls "the well-bred, the well-fed, the well-read and the well-wed," met in Philadelphia in 1787, ostensibly to amend the Articles of Confederation governing the fledgling nation. Instead, they fashioned a new government and Congress obligingly sealed the records of their proceedings for over three decades—an early control over the news!

Only with the later addition of the Bill of Rights was the Constitution ratified. Over the past two centuries, people struggling to change policies and priorities have especially prized the First Amendment, and understandably so. However, freedom of the press, like all other freedoms, is protection *from* abridgement by Congress rather than access *to* the power to define our own governance, our material needs and provisions for our very selves.

Constitutional scholar Alexander Meikeljohn wrote in 1948 of the hope originally placed in radio. He wrote of "the possibility that, as a people living a common life

under a common agreement, we might communicate with one another freely with regard to the values, the opportunities, the difficulties, the joys and sorrows, the hopes and fears, the plans and purposes, of that common life. It seemed possible that, amid all our differences, we might become a community of mutual understanding and of shared interests."

In other words, we might be a people sharing the power to define real democracy and build our capacity for self-governance.

Today, Meikeljohn would be appalled to see how little our publicly owned airwaves serve the public. Half a century ago, he lamented that "never was a human hope more bitterly disappointed. The radio as it now operates among us is not free. Nor is it entitled to the protection of the First Amendment. It is not engaged in the task of enlarging and enriching human communication. It is engaged in making money. And the First Amendment does not intend to guarantee men freedom to say what some private interest pays them to say for its own advantage. It intends only to make men free to say what, as citizens, they think, what they believe, about the general welfare."

Whatever was intended by the First Amendment, however, today's reality was set in motion in 1886 by the Supreme Court's declaration that corporations have legal personhood. Since then, these so-called corporate "persons" have accumulated First Amendment protections. This is why, for example, the ACLU defends corporate advertising as free speech!

By the turn of this century, corporations' annual advertising budget in all media approached several hundred billion dollars (and this doesn't include contributions to candidates and lobbying expenses, media essential to corporate propaganda). Rather than "we the people" employing the media to facilitate our democratic discourse, we have become consumers of the media and the products that pay its bills. The CEO of the Westinghouse Corporation, former CBS owner, put it clearly: "We are here to serve the advertisers. That is our *raison d'être*."

The resulting censorship can be as blatant as *Boston Herald* columnist Robin Washington's suspension without pay, after he complained that the newspaper killed