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Who Controls the Mass Media?

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BOOK REVIEW

WHO CONTROLS THE MASS MEDIA? By Martin H. Seiden.¹ New York, New York: Basic Books, Inc. 1974. Pp. 246. \$8.95.

Reviewed by George L. Waas²

The image of the mass media as an omnipotent pied piper, hypnotically compelling the mindless masses to happily follow its tune and absorb its biased offerings as a sponge absorbs water, is just that—an image. However, government has exploited such popularly held misconceptions of the press as a rationale for its continuing attempt to assume greater control over the mass media.

These misconceptions are the subject of Martin H. Seiden's expose regarding the role of the media in our dynamic and complex society. These attitudes, predicated upon perceptions which have gone unchallenged far too long, are without evidentiary support and do not correspond to the economic realities of the mass media as an industry.

Dr. Seiden, an economist, begins his analysis by asking: Who really controls the mass media—the media owners, the journalists or writers, the advertisers, government, or the people? The author employs statistical economic evidence to show that: newspapers and magazines are not losing out as a result of television's impact (the rate of growth of newspapers has exceeded that of television during the past decade); advertisers do not control television programming (advertisers buy time slots, not programs, from the networks); and frequency of access to television does not assure a candidate's political victory (there is a better than 50-50 chance that the candidate spending the most on television will actually lose).

In each of the eleven chapters ("Access to the American Mind," "The System," "Media Ownership," "Political Power," "The Government and the Media," "The Professionals," "The Underground," "The Entertaining Medium," "Advertising," "Mass Media in Mass Education," "American Media Abroad"), the author's message is that existing myths about the mass media are adding support for governmental policies which threaten to erode the independence of the news media. These myths, some of which the government itself knowingly promotes, also threaten to erode public confidence in the news media. Since our form of government depends upon public confidence in and the in-

1. Economic consultant and former research associate of the National Bureau of Economic Research.

2. B.S.J., University of Florida, 1965; J.D., Florida State University, 1970; Member, The Florida Bar.

dependence of these great institutions, it is crucial that everything be done to assure the vitality of unfettered news media.

What makes this succinctly written book so timely is that it comes on the heels of several profound confrontations between government and the mass media, with the Constitution of the United States as the common sword and shield. The great government-media conflict of the 1970's—as evidenced by the government's attempt to censor the press in the name of national security,³ political scandals resulting in the resignations of a President and Vice President, a denial of constitutional protection to news reporters' sources of information⁴ and the continuing debate over access to government⁵ and the media⁶—serve as the backdrop for this book.

Seiden believes that one of the prime causes of the current institutional conflict was "government subterfuge" surrounding the flow of information to the public on the Vietnam war. Seiden maintains that the credibility gap between what the government said was taking place in Vietnam and what the press reported from personal observation planted the seeds of mutual distrust which culminated in Watergate.

The rationale for the dichotomy in judicial treatment between the print media and the broadcast media is questioned by the author. Traditionally, the print media have been viewed as private business, whereas the broadcast media have been burdened with the responsibilities and obligations of a public utility. However, Seiden indicates that the real reason for this distinction may be the profound psychological impact the broadcast media have in communicating a desired message to the public.

This psychological impact theory is a frequently propounded view. This view is that once the television or radio is turned on, the viewer or listener is bombarded with music, soap operas, game shows, news, opinion and every other form of entertainment or information capable of being transmitted from the broadcaster to the masses. By using the various techniques of psychological persuasion, the "electric message" may be communicated to create a particular image or convey a desired

3. The furor over the publication of the Pentagon Papers culminated in *New York Times Co. v. United States*, 403 U.S. 713 (1971).

4. *Branzburg v. Hayes*, 408 U.S. 665 (1972). The author criticizes the Court's decision as a blow to the free flow of information to the people.

5. *Pell v. Procunier*, 417 U.S. 817 (1974), deals with media attempts to interview prisoners, but raises the broader issue of press access to government institutions and information.

6. *Miami Herald Publishing Co. v. Tornillo*, 418 U.S. 241 (1974), and *Lehman v. City of Shaker Heights*, 418 U.S. 298 (1974), are two recent cases dealing with the issue of access to the print media and public facilities for the purpose of disseminating information to the public.

impression. The audience thereby becomes a passive recipient of subliminal suggestion. Left uncontrolled, this vast power could be abused by a broadcaster who desires to present only one side of a particular issue. In an attempt to assure that the public has the opportunity to hear divergent views, government employs the Fairness Doctrine⁷ and other regulatory tools under the guise of public interest.

One difficulty with the psychological impact theory is that it is based upon the belief that the public is incapable of making its own evaluations or actively seeking out alternative sources of information and opinion. Additionally, those who support this theory manifest a belief in the "oneness" of the media—that, without government regulations, only one side of a given issue will be presented by the entire media. With more than 8,500 broadcast licensees and more than 1,800 newspapers and magazines spread across the nation, and the vast potential of cable television, the "oneness" concept is tenuous at best. In short, diversity of opinion—a professed objective of broadcast regulation by government—is actually alive and well in the mass media.

While the author advocates a press free from government interference and control, he criticizes reporters who endorse "advocacy journalism" and become participants in the events they are assigned to cover. Dr. Seiden says:

Those who advance this school of thought have abandoned concern for the journalist's credibility in favor of their own point of view. It is an arrogance born of the myth that the media are powerful because the audience is malleable. But the public is not weak minded as some believe. Facts are enough to call their attention to the issues. Editorials and news analyses have their place in the media but they should not be blended with the straight news reporting that is the backbone of mass communications. From the public's standpoint there is no difference between those who advocate a point of view out of sincerity and those who are motivated by monetary or psychological considerations. In the end the public is shortchanged in the accuracy or comprehensiveness of the information it receives.
[p. 125]

In reality, the controlling force behind the mass media is the continuing interplay of countervailing pressures exerted by government, private citizens, political parties and special interest groups. Ultimately, it is people and events that really control the mass media.

Dr. Seiden's work is most perceptive, easy to read and thought-provoking. He pulls no punches in confronting key issues involving

7. See T. EMERSON, *THE SYSTEM OF FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION* 658-60 (1970).

the government-media conflict and in challenging popular attitudes regarding the press. This is a yeoman task, and the author's ability to come to grips with a subject of this magnitude in a relatively short book is to his credit. As a student of the mass media, this reviewer finds it refreshing to see popularly held simplistic notions set up as straw men, only to be knocked down by the strong winds of economic facts and figures.