

An Informed and Educated Electorate

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by: Thom Hartmann, Berrett-Koehler Publishers | Serialized Book

If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.... Whenever the people are well-informed, they can be trusted with their own government; that, whenever things get so far wrong as to attract their notice, they may be relied on to set them right. —Thomas Jefferson

Talk Radio News Service, based in Washington, D.C., is owned and run by my dear friend Ellen Ratner. Ellen is an experienced and accomplished journalist, and a large number of interns and young journalism school graduates get their feet wet in reporting by working for and with her.

In March 2010 I was in Washington for a meeting with a group of senators, and I needed a studio from which to do my radio and TV show. Ellen was gracious enough to offer me hers. I arrived as three of her interns were producing a panel-discussion type of TV show for Web distribution at www.talkradionews.com, in which they were discussing for their viewing audience their recent experiences on Capitol Hill.

One intern panelist related that a White House correspondent for one of the Big Three TV networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC) had told her that the network registered a huge amount of interest 66 Rebooting the American Dream in the "hot story" that week of a congressman's sexual indiscretions. Far less popular were stories about the debates on health care, the conflicts in the Middle East, and even the Americans who had died recently in Iraq or Afghanistan.

*This chapter is part of an exclusive series from America's No. 1 progressive radio host, **Thom Hartmann**. Truthout is publishing weekly installments of Hartmann's acclaimed new book, **Rebooting the American Dream: 11 Ways to Rebuild Our Country**. We invite our readers to join us as, chapter by chapter, we explore these groundbreaking ideas for national transformation. » [Click here for all chapters](#)*

"So that's the story they have to run with on the news," the intern said, relating the substance of the network correspondent's thoughts, "because that's what the American people want to see. If the network doesn't give people what they want to see, viewers will tune away and the network won't have any viewers, ratings, or revenues."

 The two other interns commiserated with the first about what a shame it was that Americans wanted the titillating stories instead of the substantive ones, but they accepted without question that the network was therefore obliged to "give people what they want."

When they finished their panel discussion, I asked these college students if they knew that there was a time in America when radio and TV stations and networks broadcast the actual news— instead of infotainment—because the law required them to do so. None of them had any idea what I was talking about. They were mystified: why would a station or network broadcast programs that were not popular or not what people wanted?

The Devolution of Broadcast News

But the reality is that from the 1920s, when radio really started to go big in the United States, until Reagan rolled it back in 1987, federal communications law required a certain amount of "public service" programming from radio and television stations as a condition of retaining their broadcast licenses.

The agreement was basic and simple: in exchange for the media owners' being granted a license from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to use the airwaves—owned by the public—they had to serve the public interest first, and only then could they go about the business of making money. If they didn't do so, when it came time to renew their license, public groups and individuals could show up at public hearings on the license renewal and argue for the license's being denied.

One small way that stations lived up to their public-service mandate was by airing public-service announcements (PSAs) for local nonprofit groups, community calendars, and other charitable causes. They also had to abide by something called the Fairness Doctrine, which required them to air diverse viewpoints on controversial issues. Separately, during election campaigns, broadcasters had to abide by the Equal Time Rule, which required them to provide equal airtime to rival candidates in an election.

But the biggest way they proved they were providing a public service and meeting the requirements of the Fairness Doctrine was by broadcasting the news. Real news. Actual news. Local, national, and international news produced by professional, oldschool journalists.

Because the news didn't draw huge ratings like entertainment shows—although tens of millions of Americans did watch it every night on TV and listened to it at the top of every hour on radio from coast to coast—and because real news was expensive to produce, with bureaus and correspondents all over the world, news was a money-loser for all of the Big Three TV networks and for most local radio and TV stations.

But it was such a sacred thing—this was, after all, the keystone that held together the station's license to broadcast and thus to do business—it didn't matter if it lost money. It made all the other money-making things possible.

Through much of the early 1970s, I worked in the newsroom of a

radio station in Lansing, Michigan. It had been started and was then run by three local guys: an engineer, a salesman, and a radio broadcaster. They split up the responsibilities like you'd expect, and all were around the building most days and would hang out from time to time with the on-air crew—all except the sales guy. I was forbidden from talking with him because I worked in news. There could be no hint—ever, anywhere—that our radio station had violated the FCC's programming-in-the-public-interest mandate by, for example, my going easy on an advertiser in a news story or promoting another advertiser in a different story. News had to be news, separate from profits and revenue—and if it wasn't, I'd be fired on the spot.

News, in other words, wasn't part of the "free market." It was part of our nation's intellectual commons and thus the price of the station's license.

After Reagan blew up the Fairness Doctrine in 1987, two very interesting things happened. The first was the rise of rightwing hate-speech talk radio, starting with Rush Limbaugh that very year. The second, which really stepped up fast after President Clinton signed the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which further deregulated the broadcast industry, was that the moneylosing news divisions of the Big Three TV networks were taken under the wings of their entertainment divisions—and wrung dry. Foreign bureaus were closed. Reporters were fired. Stories that promoted the wonders of advertisers or other companies (like movie production houses) owned by the same mega-corporations that owned the networks began to appear. And investigative journalism that cast a bright light on corporate malfeasance vanished.

And because newscasts had ads, and those ads were sold based on viewership, the overall arc and content of the news began to be dictated by what the public wanted to know rather than by what they needed to know to function in a democratic society.

The interns were aghast. "Reagan did that?!" one said, incredulous. I said yes and that Bill Clinton then helped the process along to its current sorry state by signing the Telecommunications Act, leading to the creation of the Fox "News" Channel in October 1996 and its now-legal ability to call itself a news operation while baldly promoting what it knows to be falsehoods or distortions.

Now here we are in 2010, and the news media is an abject failure when it comes to reporting the real news—news that citizens in a democracy need to know. Even Ted Koppel, no flaming liberal by any means, said in an April 2010 interview with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) that he thought the state of the news industry was "a disaster." [1] He went on:

I think we are living through the final stages of what I would call the Age of Entitlement. We fight two wars without raising a single nickel to support them. We feel entitled to mortgages whether we have jobs or not. We feel entitled to make \$10 million, \$50 million, or \$100 million even though the enterprise we headed up is a total failure. And we now feel entitled not to have the news that we need but the news that we want. We want to listen to news that comes from those who already

sympathize with our particular point of view. We don't want the facts anymore.

Koppel was also well aware of the influence of profit-making on the news organizations, which he believed was driving the degradation of news so that it appealed to our baser instincts:

I think it's the producer [of the particular news show] who is at fault, who desperately needs the consumer...In the good old days, when you only had three networks—ABC, NBC, and CBS—there was competition, but the competition still permitted us to do what was in the public interest. These days all the networks have to fight with the dozens of cable outlets that are out there, the Internet that is out there, and they are all competing for the almighty dollar, and the way to get there is to head down to the lowest common denominator.

When we talk about news that people "need," we are really talking about the intellectual and informational nutrition that is essential for the health and the well-being of our democracy. We need an educated and informed citizenry to participate in our democratic institutions and elections, and we're not going to get that if we keep dumbing down the news and giving people what they want and not what they and society need.

Breaking Up the Media Monopolies

The Studio System

Back in the 1930s and 1940s, the eight biggest movie studios owned the majority of movie theaters in America. A Paramount theater, for example, would show only movies produced by Paramount's movie studios, which featured only people under contract to Paramount. The result was that the studios could make (or break) any movie star and control what people could see in their local community. It was very profitable to the studios, but it was stifling to competition and creativity and therefore a disservice to the moviegoing audience.

So through that era, in a series of actions that lasted almost a decade and which were capped by the big studios' signing a major consent decree with the feds, the federal government tried to force the big theaters to open up the business to competition. The big theaters said that they would, even agreeing to the 1940 Paramount Decree, but they continued with business as usual.

The issue came to a head when it was argued in an antitrust case before the U.S. Supreme Court in 1948. The Court, in a 7-to-1 decision, ruled against the movie giants, saying that they could no longer have total control of the vertically integrated system—from contracting with actors to making movies to showing them in their own theaters across the country. They had to choose: operate in either the movie making business or the movie showing business. They couldn't do both.

The result was the beginning of the end of the "kingmaker" movie studio monopoly and a boon for independent filmmakers. It also led to a proliferation of new theaters, from ones in urban areas (many retrofitting old opera or burlesque houses) to the new fad of drive-in movie theaters. The industry today is infinitely more diverse and

creative as a result of that breakup.

Television and the Prime Time Access Rule

In the late 1960s, television was going through a similar vertical integration, with the Big Three TV networks dominating the content of local television stations they either owned or had as affiliates. In response the FCC promulgated the Prime Time Access Rule in 1970, which dictated that at least one hour out of the four "prime time" hours on every local TV station in the nation would have to come from some source other than the network.

This opened the door to independent TV production companies, like MTM Enterprises, which produced several sitcoms derived from the work of Mary Tyler Moore, and competition from the new television divisions of old-line movie houses, such as Twentieth Century Fox's producing a TV version of M*A*S*H and Paramount's producing Happy Days.[2]

Although the rules against vertical theater integration are no longer enforced, and the Prime Time Access Rule was blown up in 1996, both the movie and TV industries are broadly more diverse in their programming than they would have been without these "market interventions" that increased competition and decreased monopoly. Which brings us to radio.

The Vicious Circle of Conservative Talk Radio

Many people wonder why the big 50,000-watt AM stations (and even many of the big 25,000- and 10,000-watt stations) across the country carry exclusively conservative programming, particularly programs featuring Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, and Glenn Beck. In most cases, it's a simple matter of the economics of monopoly.

One of the largest owners of the biggest (full-power) radio stations in the country is a mega-corporation that also owns the largest talk-radio syndication service in the nation. When the corporation's stations carry shows that its syndication service owns, it makes money both from the local station ownership and from the ownership of the syndication service. When the stations carry shows from other syndicators or independent shows, the corporation loses the syndication revenue and the local station (which it also owns) loses typically five minutes of advertising inventory per hour that it must barter with the syndicated show for in exchange for the right to air the show.

Thus, so long as the radio industry is allowed to run like the movie studio system in the 1940s, the "studio"—in this case the giant corporation that owns radio stations as well as the nation's largest talk-radio syndication service—will have an outsized influence on what shows up on the very biggest stations in the largest markets across the country. Because of the huge, booming voice of those stations, those shows will have a significant edge in "finding" listeners (and vice versa), making those shows "successful" and thus creating demand for them from the independent stations. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Some progressives have suggested that radio needs a "fairness doctrine" where a government panel will determine how much "liberal" or "conservative" programming each station carries and then

force the stations to "balance" out any disequilibrium. But who decides what is "liberal" or "conservative"? Is there a checklist of political positions that a government watchdog would have to go through—immigration, taxes, protecting the commons, gay rights, abortion, gun control, foreign policy? It would be a mess, particularly since many of those issues don't lend themselves to easy pigeonholing.

A much easier way to balance the playing field is simply to bring into the marketplace real competition by separating syndication companies from local radio stations so that the stations will no longer have an incentive to carry programming because "it's in the family" and instead will look for shows that can attract and hold an audience.

Programming in the Public Interest

We need to return to the notion of "programming in the public interest," making news back into news. We also need to start enforcing the Sherman Antitrust Act and use it to break up the large media monopolies that have re-formed since the Reagan and Clinton eras, thus effectively rolling back media deregulation.

And this isn't limited to radio and TV. Consumer-friendly regulation almost always has a similar effect in breaking up monopolies when it's designed to help people get around the monopoly.

For example, the company that owns the copper wires, cable, G3 or G4 wireless, or fiber-optic cabling going into your house also owns the exclusive right to carry the content that goes over that infrastructure. If you have a cable company supplying your home, it's probably competing only with the local phone company for your business. Because those two companies (and maybe a mobile provider) are the only ones "competing" for your business, they can easily keep prices—and profits—very high.

In most other developed countries, however, regardless of who owns and maintains the wires, cable, or fiber, anybody can offer content over it. The rationale for this is that infrastructure of physical wires and the wireless frequencies constitutes a "natural monopoly" that heavily uses public spaces (cables and phone lines go through and along public streets and rights-of-way); and so while a company can make a small profit on that part of its business, the wires and the wireless frequencies are really a part of the commons that can be regulated.

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On the other hand, these developed countries believe that the content delivery should be competitive. After all, this is where most of the innovation comes from: it's not a matter of the newest, coolest copper wires; it's the content that draws customers.

The result of this is that the average citizen in France, for example, pays about \$33 per month for what the New York Times described as "Internet service twice as fast as what you get from Verizon or Comcast, bundled with digital high-definition television, unlimited long distance and international calling to 70 countries and wireless Internet connectivity for your laptop or smartphone throughout most of the country."^[3]

And that's all from private companies, with no government subsidies. Why? Because small and new companies are allowed to compete by the government's requiring whichever company carries the signal (wire, cable, fiber, wireless) to make that signal path available to any company that wants to offer content to consumers.

Competition—mandated by the French government—has driven the price down and innovation up. The average French citizen is not only paying one-fifth of what the average American pays for such services but is also getting better quality, more variety, and much faster Internet access.

Breaking up the media monopolies and fostering more competition, innovation, and creativity in the media world clearly has public benefits, especially in ensuring that people have access to information they need to participate in our democracy. An informed and educated electorate would be one major result of such government regulation.

The same result can also be helped by making higher education more accessible to the average American.

Access to Higher Education

Jefferson's Tombstone

Thomas Jefferson's tombstone contains an epitaph that he wrote before his death with a directive that not a single word be changed. He had been the president of the United States for two terms and the vice president for one, was a member of the Virginia legislature, and was a famous inventor and architect as well as the author of nearly a million words in various letters, diaries, notebooks, books, pamphlets, and rants. But he chose not to mention any of that on his gravestone.

Besides the dates of his birth and death, he chose to be remembered for three things that he did in his 83 years of life on earth:

Here Was Buried Thomas Jefferson

Author of the Declaration of American Independence

of the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom

and Father of the University of Virginia

Writing the Declaration of Independence was an obvious choice, and declaring forever his opposition to integrating church and state also made sense (although it got him demoted in 2010 in schoolbooks in the state of Texas). But "Father of the University of Virginia" being more important than "President of the United States of America"?

Jefferson, it turns out, had this wacky idea. He actually believed that young people should be able to go to college regardless of their ability to pay, their station in life, and how rich or poor their parents were. He thought that an educated populace was the best defense of liberty and democracy in the new nation he'd helped birth.

So the University of Virginia that he started was free.

Reagan's Legacy

Ronald Reagan certainly thought that that was a wacky idea, and he was diametrically opposed to the Jeffersonian ideal. When he took office as governor of California in 1967, he quickly called for an end to free tuition at the University of California and an across-the-board 20 percent cut in state funding for higher education.[4] He then argued for a cut in spending on construction for higher education in the state and set up the firing of the popular president of the university, Clark Kerr, whom he deemed "too liberal."

When asked why he was doing away with free college in California, Reagan said that the role of the state "should not be to subsidize intellectual curiosity."

Reagan further referred to college students who nationwide were protesting the Vietnam War as "brats," "cowardly fascists," and "freaks." Adding that if the only way to "restore order" on the nation's campuses was violence, that was fine with him. Just a few days before the Kent State shootings, he famously said, "If it takes a bloodbath, let's get it over with. No more appeasement!"[5]

The trend that Reagan began with the UC system continues to this day. During Republican governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's tenure, state funding for education saw drastic cuts and tuition for undergraduate students rose by more than 90 percent.[6]

Reagan set a tone as governor of California that metastasized across the nation through the 1970s and became federal policy when he was elected president in 1980. By the time he left office in 1988, federal funding for education in the United States had declined from 12 percent of total national educational spending in 1980 to just 6 percent.[7]

Interestingly, to find most of this information you have to dive into recent biographies of the former president or read old newspaper archives that are usually not available online. Not a word of Reagan's role in slashing the UC funding exists, for example, on the Wikipedia pages for either the University of California or Reagan himself. Conservative foundations have poured millions of dollars into campaigns to scrub the Internet clean when it comes to Reagan's past (and that of most other right-wingers).

Yet the reality is that before the Reagan presidency, it was possible for any American student with academic competence to attend college and graduate without debt.

Even in Michigan in the late 1960s, where education was not free but was highly subsidized by the state, my wife paid her way through college by working part-time as a waitress at a Howard Johnson's. To the extent that I went to college (I completed less than a year altogether), I paid my own way by working as a DJ for \$2.35 per hour, running my own TV repair business, pumping gas, and working as a cook at a Big Boy restaurant on weekends.

Such a scenario is unthinkable today. Instead public higher education has become a big business and is often totally corporate; costs are through the roof; and if you're not from a very wealthy family, odds are you'll graduate college with a debt that can take decades to repay. As a result, the United States is slipping in virtually

every measurement of innovation, income, and competitiveness. A highly educated workforce is good for innovation and entrepreneurialism: every one of the top 20 innovative countries in the world—except the USA—offers free or very inexpensive college to qualified students.

Ireland took a cue from the pre-Reagan University of California and began offering free college tuition to all Irish citizens and a flat-rate registration fee of 900 euros per year for all European Union citizens. The result, decades later, is that Ireland has gone from having a backwater economy that was largely based on agriculture and tourism to becoming one of the high-tech and innovation capitals of the world.

Ironically, Ireland's vision—and California's pre-Reagan vision—of education was at the core of Thomas Jefferson's hopes for the country he helped found.

Jefferson's Vision

On June 14, 1898, more than 70 years after Jefferson's death, a new building (then called the Academic Building, now called Cabell Hall) was inaugurated at the University of Virginia. One of the nation's most prominent attorneys at the time, James C. Carter of New York City, gave the dedication speech.[8] Carter noted that when Jefferson retired from public office, he was only 66 years old and still energetic and enthusiastic to do something for his country. That something was founding the University of Virginia. Carter said:

He had cherished through life a passion for the acquisition of knowledge, and was one of the best educated men, if not the best educated man, of his country and time...

He had in early manhood formed a scheme of public education, which, from time to time, had pressed itself on his attention throughout even the busiest years of his public life. It was part of his political philosophy.

Lover of liberty as he was, firmly as he believed that popular government was the only form of public authority consistent with the highest happiness of men, he yet did not believe that any nation or community could permanently retain this blessing without the benefit of the lessons of truth, and the discipline of virtue to be derived only from the intellectual and moral education of the whole people.

Carter noted that Jefferson had laid out, in numerous letters and discussions throughout his life, a broad overview of how education should be conducted in the United States. Jefferson envisioned the division of states into districts and wards with primary schools and the establishment of colleges and universities where deserving students "might acquire, gratis, a further and higher education."

Jefferson envisioned the goal of free public education—from childhood through university—to be straightforward. In a report he prepared for a state commission in Virginia, Jefferson laid out the six purposes of education:[9]

1. To give to every citizen the information he needs for the transaction of his own business.
2. To enable him to calculate for himself, and to express and preserve his ideas, his contracts and accounts in writing.
3. To improve, by reading, his morals and faculties.
4. To understand his duties to his neighbors and country, and to discharge with competence the functions confided to him by either.
5. To know his rights; to exercise with order and justice those he retains; to choose with discretion the fiduciary of those he delegates; and to notice their conduct with diligence, with candor and judgment.
6. And, in general, to observe with intelligence and faithfulness, all the social relations under which he shall be placed.

In other words, a well-educated citizenry can "choose with discretion" the elected representatives who are the holders of our government that protects our rights, and hold those politicians accountable "with diligence, with candor and judgment."

Ronald Reagan, on the other hand, promised during his election campaign of 1980 to "eliminate the Department of Education" from the federal government; and he appointed his friend William Bennett, who had campaigned and written extensively about destroying the federal Department of Education, as secretary of education —akin to asking the fox to guard the chicken coop. Between Reagan's ax hacking at the roots of our educational systems and his tax cuts to "starve the beast" of government, we are now left with the highest illiteracy rate in the developed world and an electorate that is spectacularly vulnerable to demagoguery and cynical political manipulation.

The experiment of Reaganomics and Reagan's anti-intellectual worldview are demonstrably disordered and dead; we must put them behind us and build anew our country on the solid Jeffersonian foundation of good and free education for all.

Combine that with breaking up the media monopolies in this country and fostering competition and its attendant innovation through intelligent regulation of the "natural monopolies" in our nation, and we would have a more informed citizenry with better and faster access to real news and information—including information about our body politic.

These "radical" concepts of free public education all the way up to graduate degrees, breaking up companies that vertically integrate entire markets (particularly in the media), and requiring infrastructure-owning companies to offer their infrastructure to a wide variety of competitors work quite well in dozens of countries around the world. They can here too.

NOTES

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