

BOOK REVIEW

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The Right to Know, volume 3, edited by Zoia Horn and Nancy Gruber
(Oakland: DataCenter, 1990)

Among the many baneful policies of the Reagan administration was the systematic effort to restrict public access to information. While governmental efforts to censor and control information are not new in American history, the Reagan era saw a significant escalation of such attempts to undermine the conditions necessary for informed public debate. From the Office of Management and Budget's efforts to privatize government information to the obfuscation and distortion of facts concerning the Iran-Contra scandal, attacks on the public's right to know have been staged on many fronts.

That the Bush administration has continued this pernicious legacy was made all too clear by the tight management of the media during the Persian Gulf war. Well rehearsed during the invasions of Grenada and Panama, Pentagon strategies for controlling and shaping the news were highly effective in the Persian Gulf. The success of these strategies was insured by the docile compliance of the corporate-owned media. Only a handful of news organizations objected strongly enough to the government's handling of the press corps to join a lawsuit challenging the restrictive pool system.

The chilling effect that the combination of government control and media self-censorship has had on the political and cultural climate in this country is amply documented in *The Right to Know*, volume 3. Like its two predecessors, this is an anthology of articles from sources ranging from the *New York Times* and *Harpers* to *In These Times* and *The Nation* dealing with attacks on freedom of information. The material is divided into nine sections whose headings give a good indication of the book's content: "Secrecy and Suppression of Information" (censorship of government documents and policy coverups); "Dissent Control" (FBI surveillance of activists, banning of foreign radicals); "The Press and the Media" (self-censorship, underreported stories, biases); "Propaganda, Disinformation and Misinformation" (government manipulation and ideological distortions of the media); etc. All is not quite so bleak,

however. The final section is devoted to "Affirmations of Our Right to Know" and includes articles on the release of health records of atomic workers, the efforts of the National Security Archive to insure public access to important foreign policy documentation, and other positive developments.

Of the many outstanding articles a few deserve to be singled out. Ben Bagdikian discusses the destructive impact Cold War thinking has had on our political and social life. He shows how this warped legacy remains with us in the form of governmental secrecy and a shallow and subservient press corps. Bagdikian also makes the important point that the accelerating trend towards concentrated corporate ownership of the media is at least as detrimental to freedom of information as are governmental restrictions. While this point is touched on in several other pieces, *The Right to Know* would have benefited from further analysis of the political economy of the mass media.

Marc Cooper and Laurence Soley present the results of a two year study of the "expert" commentators used by the major network news programs. The results reveal this group to be remarkably homogeneous. Those analysts relied on by the media to interpret national and world events are largely male East Coast conservatives, often former officials of Republican administrations.

Also a must read is the "propaganda model" provided by Edward S. Herman and the indefatigable Noam Chomsky. The authors identify several factors such as the concentrated ownership and profit orientation of the mass media, advertising, and reliance on government sources which have the effect of filtering the raw material of news and rendering it sanitized and distorted.

Much of the material included in this volume of *The Right to Know* is as insightful and informative as the few articles mentioned here. One wishes that introductory essays had been provided for the different sections, but this hardly detracts from the admirable achievement of editors Horn and Gruber in bringing together the voices of those few journals and writers who take seriously the independence and critical role of the news media.



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