

# Reading in the Age of Global Media

by Mark Crispin Miller

Since I'm among friends I will speak more candidly than I'm ordinarily inclined. On the subject of media ownership and libraries, I wanted to come up with a succinct but deeply moving epigraph for my remarks, and I wanted something from Benjamin Franklin. I couldn't remember him saying anything about creating the first library in the United States, as I'm sure you know he did in 1731. Eleven years later that library was chartered as the Free Library of Philadelphia. Not knowing where to turn, I turned to the Internet. I could have used a librarian to help me out, but instead I put in "Benjamin" and "library" as keywords. I discovered a lot of things about the Free Library of Philadelphia, but I couldn't find anything on its history. Now I'm sure there's a site with the Library's history on it, but the fact is, the screen was covered with advertisements. I never found anything about Benjamin Franklin or the history of the Free Library. So, let this story stand as an epigraph to what I'm going to say. I'm here to talk about reading in the age of global media.

We live at a moment of unprecedented economic concentration in all sectors of the economy, but most dramatically and most influentially in the media industries. Book publishing is now in exactly the same position as all the other culture industries, even though it has historically been very different in its structure, its reach, and its economics from TV or radio. Book publishing has historically been more like newspaper publishing – congeries of family owned newspapers in different cities (which itself has only recently become a matter for huge chains like the New York Times Co., Knight-Ridder, etc.). The fact is that publishing at its best in this country and Europe was always a cottage industry. I've been accused of romanticizing this past, and I'm unapologetic for that. Publishing was a different business when it was run by people who loved books. Quaint, I know, but books were the point. Book publishing was never a good business for those who wanted to get rich, and it still isn't. Newhouse is happy to sell out to Bertelsmann, and Rupert Murdoch is eager to find a buyer for HarperCollins. Viacom would like to sell Simon & Schuster. Publishing is not a moneymaking business. (I say this as the son of

publishers: my parents owned Academy Publishers.) All that has changed now. Most of American publishing has been absorbed by a nexus of 7 (formerly 8) global media corporations: among them Bertelsmann, Time-Warner, Murdock's news corporation, and Hearst. That's it. There are two major independents left in this country: Houghton Mifflin in Boston, and W.W. Norton in New York. Meanwhile we have 2 book marketing superchains going head to head compounding the problem. The output of small and alternative publishing houses will inevitably fall out of these book superchains because they're driven by bestsellers, to which I will return in a moment. So we've got the houses owned/absorbed into nexus of few, very huge corporations and we've got the book retail industry succumbing to conglomeration, and distribution by two big firms.

Meanwhile there is less money for public libraries, and there is less and less money for academic libraries.

The direct consequences of conglomerization are worth noting. I learned from Nancy Kranich at NYU about the tremendous profiteering that goes on now. Certain publishers own so many journals and charge for highly specialized subscriptions up to \$15,000 per year. This is a disaster. This is an example of the classic consequences of economic over-concentration. Anyone in the Department of Justice would understand that too much concentration of economic power equals profiteering, not competition. Bear in mind that we're seeing the same thing over all media. As soon as the Telecom Bill was passed in 1996, radio came to an end as a competitive business. There are no minority station owners to speak of, and you have huge concerns like Westinghouse and Infinity, the largest radio company in the world now. If you drive around the country and listen to the radio in Omaha for example, you'll probably hear the same thing as in San Francisco because it's centrally programmed. I'm not an expert in economics or in the library field, so what I want to do, having introduced this talk, is offer observations on the subtler problems of libraries in the United States today. The library is fundamentally at odds with the culture of the TV and fundamentally at odds with TV's message. I want to talk about that and I want to talk about how the library, by its very nature, is a repudiation of the media culture. I will end on more positive note, because the library needn't be only a repudiation.

What it is about a library that makes it definitive? Well, many people will tell you that it is, first of all, a quiet place. Not always, but it is certainly renowned for its silence and indeed the figure of the librarian is routinely

ridiculed on this account. The figure of the librarian, like the figure of the teacher, like the figure of a nun, is always a repressive presence, prune-faced, nasty, asking people to be silent, hushing people, pointing to the "silence is golden" sign. First, it's a female figure, which is one strike against her. Second, she's asking for people to control themselves, which is another strike against her. And third, there's something vaguely 19<sup>th</sup> century about her – school marm, scolding – these are all words used to put people down routinely. However, silence is a precious thing in a world of advertising, ceaseless solicitation, in a world of very noisy, very expert propaganda. A quiet place to think is a near-miracle today and inasmuch as the library is such a place, it doesn't go along with much else in the current media culture, MTV, walkmans, surround sound, or anything else. Just by its contemplative quiet, it recalls the monastic origins of the postclassical library, the library is an anomaly.

In a second, very fundamental sense the books are all there at the library. If they're not there, they're in storage, they don't get pulped. I'm sure they do sometimes, but basically it is contrary to nature for the library to throw books away. The library is an archive we can have faith in, whose persistence we can trust. We know the record of the culture is there somewhere. The bigger the library the more volumes. Compare this to Borders or Barnes & Noble. The many developments I've talked about at the outset have tended to encourage a book culture in which books do not last. This is memorialized in a 1979 Supreme Court decision which upheld an IRS ruling that books are like machine parts – they cannot be taken as a tax write-off when they are warehoused. As a result, publishers can no longer afford to keep books in inventory, and that means publishers cannot keep books available in print. I hear horror stories from my friends who say that a publishing executive ordered that three tons of books be pulped – literally bulldozed – because it was not cost effective to keep them. Further, because there's so much competition for the shelf space in those super-chains I noted, the shelf life of your average book is comparable to the shelf life of yogurt or houseflies, as I have said in my writing. (Fierce competition to sell books shouldn't be confused with a diversity of viewpoints, by the way.) The fact of the matter is that, if you read about a book in the *New York Times*, Borders will probably have it. Barnes & Noble and Borders order alot, and I have found many things in their stores I might not have otherwise known about. But if you go back in 10 days it might well be gone from the shelves, never to return. Interestingly enough, since it no longer pays to warehouse books, there is a whole generation of titles that sold well, got great reviews, are important books, and they're all out-of-print!

They're gone! They don't exist! For instance, Lou Cannon's magisterial biography of Ronald Reagan was published seven years ago and is titled *The Role of a Lifetime*. It got great reviews and it is a great book. Try to find it now. It is not in paperback – it's gone. The library in this sense, is the antithesis of a book superchain where you're bedazzled by all these attractive, but perishable items.

Most crucially (and here I may sound sentimental), the library is public – books are free, and they're available to everybody. I'll read the mission statement of the Free Library of Philadelphia:

The mission of the Free Library of Philadelphia is to provide to all segments of the population of Philadelphia, a comprehensive collection of recorded knowledge, data, artistic expression and information to assure ease of access to these materials, and to provide programs to stimulate the awareness and use of those programs.

I'm not fond of the last part (it's kind of PR speak), but it's an unexceptionable statement nonetheless. Franklin had in mind yet another great democratic innovation – a free library. Think about it. Books are not like boxes of Kleenex, or paper hats, or slurpees. They're not meant to be consumed and tossed. They're there. You read it, you put it back, and somebody else reads it. That's amazing. I would say that the public library may be the last great public institution in the United States, or the last great public institution of the United States that has a civilizing aim. Now of course libraries got a huge boost in the 19<sup>th</sup> century from Andrew Carnegie who endowed many of them with \$40,000,000, and that was not hay back in those days. (Today it's like lunch money.) We thank him and bless his gift of private money, but the thesis here is that books should be in the library and free to everybody as a democratic, public good, funded by the public sphere.

At this moment, we live in a world of increasingly privatized space; the public sphere is under siege for a number of reasons – economic and ideological, and so on. The notion of public services, of government participation in the economy, has been completely discredited and the library suffers greatly because of this. I don't have to tell the people in this room what I'm talking about here. Whether it's university cutbacks in library budgets, or whether it's a matter of cutbacks in civic funding, municipal funds, state funds, the problem is exactly the same. The library

has a crucial function that is now actually being threatened. With all due respect to the people who think that the Internet will save us, the Internet cannot replace the library because not everyone can afford to go online, whereas the library is a place where anyone can go. All they need is a proof of residence, and one can be further helped by professionals who know how to instruct in the indispensable art of finding out what's out there to read and to learn. Another difference between the library and the Internet is that the Internet is a kind of jungle, a kind of bizzare universe, in which you can be forever stuck in mazes – lost. You can click on whatever obsesses you and read nothing but prejudices, preconceptions, and obsessions. You can inhabit a world of Nazi conspiracy theories, if you like. There's no one there to suggest to you that there's another point of view. On the Internet, Microsoft, Disney, and other providers of the search engines help you find what you want so you don't encounter smut, so you do not encounter anything that might presumably discomfort you, Microsoft or Disney. Librarians are skilled at telling people how to find out things that they need to know. It is not just a matter of saying go down to level three and look on these shelves, but telling people how to use the catalog, the Internet, how to use databases.

In sum, we live in a time of unprecedented privatization, unprecedented media concentration, when it is difficult to find a quiet place to think, when all information tends to come at us in predigested bites without any ambiguity or nuance. We live in a time (now I'm going to sound archaic but I think it is the most appropriate word) of propaganda. It is a time of unprecedented mass saturation of various propaganda, be they political or commercial. Advertising is a form of propaganda. In contrast, the function of the library, like the function of the school, is to help us to become better citizens by introducing us to other points of view. It's certainly the function of the teacher to instruct the young on how to think, not the function of a librarian to do that. But librarians can take that newly thoughtful person and lead them to what they can look into and where to find it. Go to Borders and you won't find that, or perhaps if you did you couldn't afford it. In the library it's free. Inasmuch as we are in need of a quiet space where various points of view pervade and are made available, the library is not just a repudiation of the media culture, but it is in fact, ultimately the salvation of civilized life and of democracy. This sounds over the top, rhetorically. It also sounds like I'm trying to flatter, but as one whose happiest hours were spent in libraries, I say this from the heart: the library is an indispensable resource for democracy just as Benjamin Franklin understood. It is important to do something more than simply fight back against

those various parochial forces that are always trying to get you to take books off the shelves. This is a problem all over the country: keeping Judy Bloom on the shelves or *Heather has Two Mommies* or *Huckleberry Finn*. I would suggest, however, that it is not the overwhelming problem. The problem is, paradoxically, the technological and economic mechanisms that seem to be giving us so much that we can't even begin to comprehend all the choices. That mechanism in various indirect ways is impoverishing libraries and cultural life in general. So you are to be saluted, and you are to be encouraged because without libraries and without the services that libraries provide, Benjamin Franklin and his compatriots may have failed.

*Further comments from Miller in response to the audience:*

There's a basic rhetorical device that I encounter when I talk and write: it is to caricature what I've said as the apocalyptic ravings of a grinch who thinks that there is nothing good out there and that we should all go home and kill ourselves. The point here is not whether we think things are great, or whether we think things are lousy. The point here is that we're trying to talk about power as Franklin did, and as Tom Paine did. We are living in a moment of extreme concentrations of power, a moment at which, not only many members of the general public, but many of the media workers in these different culture industries agree that something's wrong. There are the beginnings now of an understanding that there's a direct connection between the deplorable phenomena of the Lewinsky-type of coverage on the one hand, and the kind of concentration we've been talking about on the other. It is an economic situation deeply affecting our culture. To throw up our hands and say "oh well, things aren't so bad" is to leave out of account the democratic alternative or, dare I say, the democratic obligation. I don't think we are fulfilling our obligations as citizens in a democracy if we let the economy take care of everything. Over and over again I hear the comment that "oh well, that's the economy." You would think that we were living in the Soviet Union, because the economy made all the decisions there too. We live in a world where there has to be a state of politics, as well as an economy, or else we're going to be back to the days of Carnegie.

By way of some perspective, every time there's been a major, technological innovation in communications over the last 100 years, there's been an upsurge in millennial optimism, starting with the film industry, and going on to radio, and going on to TV. However, technology itself won't deliver us from evil. We have to make sure that technology's democratic potential is preserved. In the 1996 Telecom Bill, which I don't expect that anyone in

here has read because its 40,000 pages long and deliberately impenetrable, one of the subtexts in the legislation was to make sure that cyberspace is a corporate property. I think the Internet is a fabulous thing, e-mail is a terrific aid, but that bill tells us that the Internet is not something that's going to maintain its integrity all by itself. (Robert McChesney of the University of Wisconsin is someone important to read on this point.) It's very important, it seems to me, that the citizens of this country know who owns the media, and know the consequences of the concentration of ownership, and not get lost in the latest hype over technological utopia. The only way to do that is going to happen is through the schools, libraries, religious arenas, through the labor unions...it ain't gonna happen through the media!

*Response to Mark Crispin Miller  
by John Buschman*

I tend, in the main, to agree with Dr. Miller, and I would like to bring some of his issues closer yet to librarianship. I think there has been a culture change, both generally and specifically, within our profession. For instance, ALA's policy manual lists all kinds of policies which drive us into action and drive us into at least studying and publicizing what we've been talking about. For instance, the "Library Bill of Rights" (Policy 53.1) states that: "Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval." That idea is repeated about three or four more times in the text of other access and in preservation policies. That position alone should drive librarians into some form of activism. However, it is not a secret that ALA is trying to finesse the role of social activism, developed in the sixties and seventies based on these policies, in light of a new economic "realism" and the dominant sponsoring culture of our field which has just been thoroughly presented.

Dr. Miller has picked up and carried forward the work of a wonderful scholar, Ben Bagdikian who wrote in the 1970s and throughout the 1980s in the same vein. I'd like to read a quote from something he wrote almost ten years ago:

The global media oligopoly is not visible to the eye of the consumer. Newsstands still display rows of newspapers

and magazines in a dazzling variety of colors and subjects. Bookstores and libraries still offer miles of shelves stocked with individual volumes. Throughout the world, broadcasting cable channels continue to multiply, as do videocassettes and music recordings in dozens of languages. But if this bright kaleidoscope suddenly disappeared and was replaced by the corporate colophons of those who own this output the collage would go gray with the names of the few media multi-nationals that now command that field.

This trend has been known in our profession for a long time. For instance, John Haar has been writing for over a decade about how electronic resources tend to sway our collecting patterns. Let's face it, what the kids use, what the students use, what is popular is what we tend to select for our collections. Haar has noted that the popularity of those new electronic resources drives our patterns of collecting. Our institutions do have a curriculum, be they a public library or academic, and we try to respond to what is our curriculum. Too often, popularity has become our curriculum.

Charles Willett published a study in 1992 that talked about libraries' over-reliance on review mechanisms, which focus almost exclusively on mainstream publishers and mainstream book distributors. He noted that there is an institutionalized hesitation to purchase alternative materials for libraries. We tend to want the *Choice* review or the stamp of approval of appearing in *New York Times Book Review* or *Booklist* or *Publishers Weekly*. Those are very narrowing mechanisms. Further, book distribution is essentially dominated by two or three large firms in our field. What they choose to provide quick access to is probably the key. How many of us have hesitated okaying an order because we know it's going to give our order department and business office, and clerical staff fits because it's not put out by Yale University Press or HarperCollins? It happens every day. The library systems that we purchase, our bread-and-butter online catalogs, are increasingly owned by corporate giants or those fake nonprofits like OCLC or CARL or RLIN. There is virtually no distinction that I can tell between the large library nonprofit cooperatives and a for-profit institution anymore. They all aggressively market their services, they all aggressively develop products, absorb new ones from other companies, sell spin-offs. Their behavior is basically identical. Roughly 30 percent of our library systems are now owned by some sort of corporate, or quasi-corporate vendor like Ameritech and whoever owns CARL and UNCover now. A