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"The Media Revolution"

by John Fund
Editorial Writer, Wall Street Journal

John Fund is an editorial writer for the *Wall Street Journal*. His insightful articles have made him a familiar name to America's top business executives and political leaders.

He began his journalism career in 1982 as investigative reporter for syndicated columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak. In 1984, he joined the *Journal* as deputy features editor for the editorial page, and since 1987 has specialized in writing about politics and government. He is the co-author with James Coyne



of *Cleaning House: America's Campaign for Term Limits* and collaborated with Rush Limbaugh on his number-one, best-selling book, *The Way Things Ought to Be*. ♣

A "new," liberating force is revolutionizing the American media: competition. For years, the three major television networks and a handful of newspapers, radio programs, and magazines have dominated the information business. But, as Wall Street Journal editorialist John Fund argues here, millions of people are now turning to alternative news sources. The media gatekeepers can no longer control what gets into the news or how it will be presented. That's good news for the news, Fund says, and for our nation.

In George Orwell's chilling novel *1984*, the state attempts to control citizens through two-way "telescreens" in their homes that bombard them with propaganda and monitor their every move and spoken word. Since his novel was published in the 1940s, many people have worried that technology would allow governments unprecedented power over their citizens. Was Orwell a prophet, they wondered?

Well, we now know that Orwell was wrong, and spectacularly so. He was wrong not about the nature of totalitarianism—he was perhaps its sharpest and most vivid critic—but about the role technology would play in the future. In the "Information Age," it has proven to be a liberating force.

Technology and the information it conveys directly contributed to the collapse of the Soviet

Union, as Scott Shane documents in *Dismantling Utopia*: “The new technology turned out to include weapons the citizen could wield against the state as readily as the state could use them on the citizen.” He adds that once Gorbachev was compelled to allow citizens access to information, “the forbidden fruit soon swept across Soviet existence, touching every nook of daily life, battering hoary myths and lies, and ultimately eroding the foundations of Soviet power.”

New technology is also reshaping and empowering citizens in the Western democracies. Walter Wriston, the former chairman of Citibank, argues that “the Information Age is rapidly giving power to the people” and “driving nation-states toward cooperation with each other so that the world’s work can get done.”

Nowhere is the Information Age having a more profound effect than here in the United States. Here, the flow of information is more free than anywhere else. But American journalists still have a protected status—a kind of diplomatic immunity, if you will—courtesy of the First Amendment. While they favor and even agitate for regulation of every other industry, journalists insist that there is no such thing as “reasonable regulation” of the media. Government meddling in the media always makes matters worse. It deprives the public of vital information, stifles debate, and intimidates and punishes political enemies.

The fact that journalists regard their free-

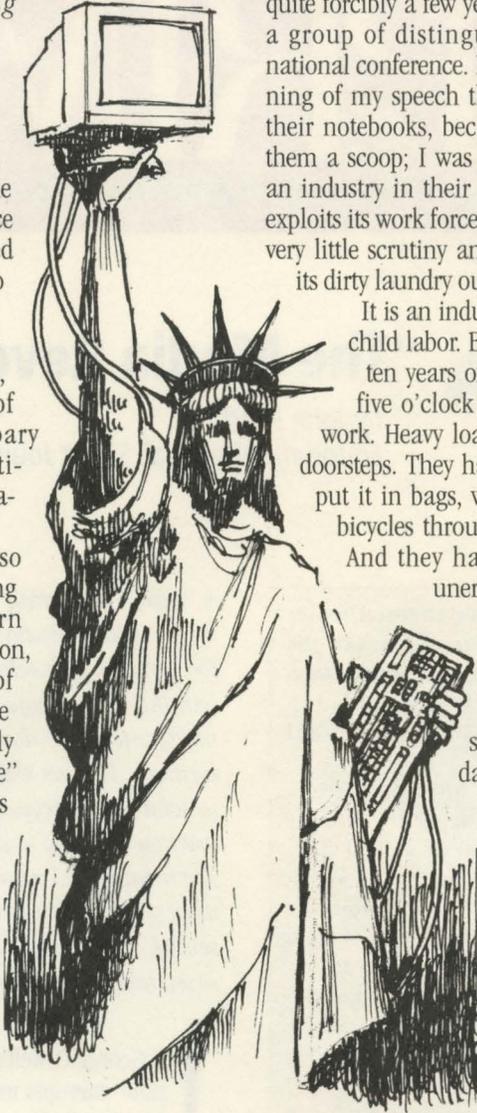
dom as sacrosanct was brought home to me quite forcibly a few years ago when I addressed a group of distinguished journalists at a national conference. I announced at the beginning of my speech that they should take out their notebooks, because I was going to give them a scoop; I was going to tell them about an industry in their country that consistently exploits its work force—an industry that receives very little scrutiny and that often tries to keep its dirty laundry out of the news.

It is an industry that heavily relies on child labor. Boys and girls as young as ten years of age are forced to rise at five o’clock in the morning to go to work. Heavy loads are deposited on their doorsteps. They have to fold each item and put it in bags, which they must haul on bicycles throughout the neighborhood.

And they have to deliver each item unerringly to its specific destination. They must do this in all kinds of weather, often enduring heat, cold, rain, and snow. They face potentially dangerous hazards: traffic, biting dogs, strangers who might do them harm. For all this difficult work, they are paid far less than the minimum wage—pennies per item.

Most of the journalists stopped scribbling before I finished my speech. They correctly guessed that I was describing the newspaper industry and that the exploited child laborers were paper boys and girls. They were outraged; though these journalists are vocal advocates of child labor laws when applied to other industries, they demand that their industry should remain exempt. The courts have bowed to

journalists on this issue, accepting the curious argument that the First Amendment would be abridged if children could not be employed to deliver newspapers.



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The Demise of the Media Gatekeepers

The media, of course, demands exemption from all kinds of regulation, not just child labor laws. We journalists are experts at convincing others that we are providing a highly valuable service and that we are the watchdogs of society. As *Chicago Tribune* columnist Stephen Chapman points out, journalists self-righteously claim that their occupation champions truth, enlightens an uninformed citizenry, and is somehow more “noble” than other occupations. “Journalists believe other industries provide their customers with what they want. We journalists believe we fulfill needs. The trouble is, we don’t know for certain what people need. We only know what we think they need,” he concludes.

To some extent, this media arrogance is understandable. The media has had a very real power that *does* distinguish it from other industries. For years it has been in the position of deciding *what is important for its customers to know*. But all that is changing in the 1990s. We are living through not just an information revolution, but a media revolution. Increasing competition is forcing more and more media outlets to take account of the demands of consumers of the news. Like big government, big business and big labor, big media is at last learning about the real world of the free market.

Once it was possible for the “media gatekeepers” to control the flow of information to the American people. Once a handful of national publications and three major networks filtered the news and set the parameters of political debate. But rival information networks have sprung up everywhere in the 1990s. We are on the verge of having 500-channel cable systems, and desktop publishing makes it possible to deliver information to hundreds of niche markets. Five million Americans have satellite dishes. In 1988, there were 200 radio talk shows. Now there are a thousand such programs. Rush Limbaugh has a weekly audience of 20 million people. One out of every six Americans is a regular listener to talk radio. One listener says, “Talk radio is a response to an elitist, biased and out-of-touch media. People who never had a say in any political arena can now call in and be heard.”

Electronic “town halls” and computer bulletin boards are also an increasing source of information. A single computer network, Internet, receives more than three million calls a day. It features 5,000 electronic discussion groups and 2,500 electronic newsletters 24

hours a day. Once you have a personal computer—and a third of Americans now do—and a telephone modem, it costs \$10 a month to subscribe—that is how much the cost of this new information technology is being driven down by competition.

Other kinds of new information technology have helped ordinary citizens bypass the media gatekeepers. In February of 1994, for example, an amendment was added at the last minute to a major education bill pending in Congress. It would have effectively required private school teachers and the parents of home schoolers in every state to be certified by the government.

The major media outlets were completely uninterested in covering this story, even though one million American families now engage in home schooling. Nor were they moved by the fact that the amendment would have been an unprecedented assault on the nature of private education and individual freedom in America. But a few private school and home school groups did try to get the word out. They reached 200,000 individuals through fax and telephone “trees” in the space of 72 hours. As a result, an avalanche of calls and faxes opposing the amendment poured into congressional offices. Talk radio took up the issue. “Please stop calling,” one congressional chief of staff begged a home school lobbyist. “I believe in democracy. It’s just that we’ve had about as much democracy as we can handle for one day.” The amendment, which had been expected to pass, was defeated by a vote of 424 to 1. Access to the news through alternative information networks literally kept private school and home school students free.

The alternative media and new information technology are revolutionizing our entire society by changing the way many issues, from education to taxes to health care, are debated. Americans have a greater opportunity than ever before to find out what is going on and to make their voices heard. “The congregation has rebelled against the media priesthood and is doing an end-run around it,” says media analyst Robert Lichter.

We, the media gatekeepers, had better look out! The gate is swinging wide open. We can no longer effectively bottle up information and keep it from the public if we don’t like it. The Berlin Wall that has existed for decades in the media industry is falling apart brick by brick. We cannot guard the entire length and breadth of the electronic spectrum. We cannot hem in every cable program, talk radio show, computer bulletin board, and fax machine.

The Public's Responsibility

The media revolution is bringing about a more open, vigorous, and honest debate on issues. Though media and government elites still command a great deal of power, the public has access to more information—and, therefore, more power—than ever before.

It also means that the public has more responsibility than ever before. Citizens should not be satisfied when journalists and politicians try to persuade them they must leave solutions to the “experts.” Nor should they

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blindly accept the argument that the system of limited government and maximum personal liberty the framers of the Constitution devised is inadequate to address modern problems. As President Ronald Reagan reminded us, “The experts tell us there are no simple answers to our difficulties. They’re wrong. There *are* simple answers, just not easy ones.”

The American people have it in their power to rediscover the simple answers and the “legacy of freedom” that Hillsdale College President George Roche argues is the cornerstone as well as the central, animating force of our nation. The media revolution will help them. 🌱

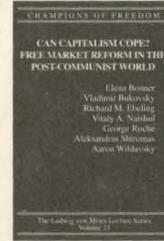
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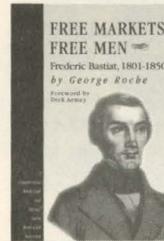
looks at the moral nature of capitalism. Doug Bandow, Michael Bauman, E. Calvin Beisner, Michael Cromartie, Dick DeVos, Burton W. Folsom, Jr., Peter Marshall, Thomas M. Nies, Robert A. Sirico, Charles D. Van Eaton. (1994) 170 pp., \$9.95 (paperbound.)

CHAMPIONS OF FREEDOM, VOLUME 21 *Can Capitalism Cope? Free Market Reform in the Post-Communist World*



features essays by Elena Bonner, Vladimir Bukovsky, Richard M. Ebeling, Vitaly A. Naishul, George Roche, Aleksandras Shtromas, and Aaron Wildavsky. (1994) 228 pp., \$9.95 (paperbound).

Free Markets, Free Men: Frederic Bastiat, 1801-1850



A revised edition of a conservative classic, this book profiles one of the world's greatest free market thinkers. It is especially timely in light of recent debates on free trade. Foreword by Rep. Dick Armey. (1993) 181 pp., \$14.95 (paperbound).

In The First Place: 20 Years of the Most Consequential Ideas from Hillsdale College's Monthly Journal, Imprimis

January 1992 marked the 20-year anniversary of *Imprimis*. From more than 240 issues, we have selected a few of the very best, by authors who have themselves lived the kind of intellectual adventure this volume describes. (1992) 260 pp., 22 sketches, \$15.95 (hardbound).



IMPRIMIS (im-pri-mis), taking its name from the Latin term, “in the first place,” is the publication of Hillsdale College. Executive Editor, Ronald L. Trowbridge; Managing Editor, Lissa Roche; Assistant, Patricia A. DuBois. Illustrations by Tom Curtis. The opinions expressed in IMPRIMIS may be, but are not necessarily, the views of Hillsdale College and its External Programs division. Copyright © 1994. Permission to reprint in whole or part is hereby granted, provided a version of the following credit line is used: “Reprinted by permission from IMPRIMIS, the monthly journal of Hillsdale College.” **Subscription free upon request.** ISSN 0277-8432. Circulation 560,000 worldwide, established 1972. IMPRIMIS trademark registered in U.S. Patent and Trade Office #1563325.