

# Cultural Studies, Media Spectacle, and Election 2004

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A popular government without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy, or perhaps both.

—James Madison

Since the rise of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham England in the 1960s as well as in subsequent versions of cultural studies throughout the world, there has been a long-standing tradition of taking on the big issues of the era. The Birmingham School took on the assaults against working class culture by American and mass media culture. In this conjuncture, British cultural studies stressed the need for media literacy and critique, learning to read newspapers, TV news, advertisements, TV shows and the like just as one learns to read books (see Kellner, 1995). The project helped generate a media literacy movement, expanded the concept of literacy, and introduced a new, powerful dimension of pedagogy into cultural studies.

Later, in the 1980s, British cultural studies took on the rise of Thatcherism and the emergence of a new rightwing conservative hegemony in Britain, by explaining how British culture, media, politics, and various economic factors led to the emergence of a new conservative hegemony (see Hall & Jacques, 1983). Larry Grossberg (1992), Stanley Aronowitz (1993), myself (Kellner & Ryan, 1988; Kellner, 1991 & 1995), and others engaged in similar work within the U.S. throughout the Reagan era of the 1980s, applying cultural studies to analyze the big issues of the time.

Indeed, one of my major focuses of the past two decades has been the use of cultural studies and critical social theory to interrogate the big events of the time: *The Persian Gulf TV War* (Kellner, 1992), *Grand Theft 2000: Media Spectacle and a Stolen Election* (Kellner, 2001), *From September 11<sup>th</sup> to Terror War* (Kellner, 2003b) on the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks and their exploitation by the Bush administration to push through rightwing militarism, interventionism, unilateralism and a hard-right domestic agenda, including the Patriot Act (Kellner 2003b), and *Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy* (Kellner, 2005), which demonstrated how the Bush administration consistently manipulated media spectacle during its first term and in the highly contested and controversial 2004 election. In my books *Media Culture* (Kellner, 1995) and *Media Spectacle* (Kellner 2003a), I use cultural studies to critically interrogate major phenomena of the day like Reagan and Rambo, Madonna and pop feminism, rap and hip hop, cyberpunk and the Internet, McDonald's and globalization, Michael Jordan and the Nike spectacle, and other defining cultural phenomena of the era.

Cultural studies is an interdisciplinary, trans-disciplinary, and counter-disciplinary approach that can be used to address a wide range of cultural phenomena from advertising to political narratives (see Kellner, 1995; 2003a). A

multi-perspectival and interdisciplinary enterprise, it draws on a number of disciplines to engage the production and political economy of culture, critical engagement with texts, and audience research into effects. As a trans-disciplinary enterprise, it has its own integrity as defined by the practices, methods, and work developed within its ever-expanding tradition. And it is counter-disciplinary, by refusing assimilation into standard academic disciplines, being open to a variety of methods and theoretical positions, and assuming a critical-oppositional stance to the current organization of the university, media, and society.

In this paper, I will illustrate my approach to cultural studies and the general importance of cultural studies through an analysis of the media spectacle of Election 2004. A cultural studies approach would involve a critical reading of the production of Election 2004 text; analysis of the election's dominant images, discourses, spectacles, and narratives; and an investigation of the ways in which audiences processed the election issues and media presentation and voted accordingly. Fully understanding voter behavior in Election 2004 is beyond the scope of this analysis and perhaps our present state of knowledge. In terms of the unfolding of the Bush and Kerry election campaigns in the corporate media, my analysis suggests major transformations of the media in the United States, an unparalleled process of deception and media manipulation by the Bush-Cheney campaign, and a crisis of democracy in the U.S. today. This threatening situation requires cultural studies to take up media studies and to use critical social theory to assess the current situation within the USA during the contemporary moment.

As I proceed, I will make comments on my meta-theoretical model of a trans-disciplinary cultural studies that combines critical social theory, philosophy, media and communications studies, and other disciplines along with cultural analysis. Cultural studies has distinguished itself by its border-crossing and trans-disciplinary status as well as its openness to a plurality of methods and issues, while, at its best, keeping its original progressive political agenda, pedagogical goals, and critical-oppositional force.

### **The Media in Election 2004<sup>1</sup>**

During Election 2004, conservative campaign strategists obtained a memo by Mark Halperin, ABC's political director, which was leaked to the *Drudge Report*. Halperin wrote that "Kerry distorts, takes out of context, and [makes] mistakes all the time, but these are not central to his efforts to win. While both sides should be held accountable, that doesn't mean we reflexively and artificially hold both sides 'equally' accountable when the facts don't warrant that."<sup>2</sup> In other words, Halperin implied that distortion was central to the Bush-Cheney campaign, but what little fact-checking the television networks did equally cited Bush and

Kerry misstatements. Most significant, however, was the inference that the corporate media failed to investigate the deliberate and systematic lies of the Bush-Cheney campaign, their appalling record in office, or the dire consequences of four more years of hard-right Republican misrule. As I argue in my book *Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy* (Kellner, 2005), Halperin was right to suggest that while all political candidates spin and misspeak, it was important to grasp the extremity of the Bush-Cheney campaign lies.

The right-wing attack apparatus, of course, interpreted Halperin's words as documenting "liberal bias" among the mainstream television networks, and fiercely assailed Halperin and anyone in the mainstream media deemed critical of the Bush-Cheney campaign or positively disposed toward the Kerry candidacy. The right-wing claim of a "liberal media" is absurd, for the mainstream media in the United States have tended to be largely uncritical of Reagan and the two Bush administrations, but were fiercely critical of Clinton and his administration.

In particular, 24/7 cable news networks like Fox and the NBC cable networks have, over the past decade, strongly favored the Republicans and sharply criticized Democrats and "liberals" (Alterman, 2003; Brock, 2004). As I show in Kellner 2005, during the Bush-Cheney administration, the corporate media failed to investigate in any depth the scandals of Bush and Cheney, their bogus claims over weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, the destructive consequences of their domestic and foreign politics, and their systematically mendacious discourse throughout four years of governing and throughout the 2004 election. Hence, although the media were *attack dogs* during the Clinton era, they became *lap dogs* during the Bush-Cheney era and have largely abandoned their role as *watch dogs* investigating economic and political scandal and corruption in the public interest, thus aggravating a crisis of democracy in the United States.

Democracy requires a separation of powers in which the media act as a "Fourth Estate," investigating, criticizing, and debating government and corporate abuse of power. The media in a democratic society are supposed to be part of a system of checks and balances and if they are controlled by powerful corporate or state forces and fail to carry out their watchdog functions, they are nothing more than instruments of propaganda and entertainment. Moreover, a vigorous democracy requires informed citizens who have the information necessary to participate in political discussion, debate, movements and other activities. If the media do not provide adequate information, debate issues of crucial importance, and help promote informed democratic participation, they are failing to meet their democratic responsibilities. Over the past several decades, I have been arguing that the corporate media in the U.S. have promoted a crisis of democracy as they have failed to serve as an adequate bulwark against corporate and state power,

have curtailed their investigative and critical social functions, and have not adequately informed the public (see Kellner, 1990; 2001; 2003; 2005)

In their coverage of Election 2004, as with previous elections, corporate media inordinately focused on polls and the election process itself, and inadequately focused on issues, the records of the candidates, and the potential consequences of their policies. “Debate” was often reduced to shouting matches, as on CNN’s *Crossfire*, MSNBC’s *Hardball*, or countless Fox TV programs. The highly charged clash of opposing party spin lines of the day helped to polarize the country and failed to illuminate the issues and differences between the candidates. And, as the CBS memo incident indicates, the few efforts towards investigative journalism on corporate television networks were highly flawed and grossly inadequate, pointing to a crisis of investigative broadcasting that is part of a larger crisis of journalism in the United States today.

### **Lies, Smears, and the Bush-Cheney Assault on the Press**

For nothing can seem foul to those that win.  
—Shakespeare, *Henry IV, Part I*

In particular, the mainstream media failed to cover the systematic lies used by the Bush-Cheney campaign in Election 2004. On March 10, 2004, when speaking to AFL-CIO union workers in Chicago, John Kerry said in what he thought was an off-mike comment: “Let me tell you — we’re just beginning to fight here. These guys are the most crooked, lying group of people I’ve ever seen.” Although Kerry was savaged by the Republican attack apparatus for this comment, in retrospect, he was quite correct. It is well documented that the Bush-Cheney administration has governed with lies and deception (Conason, 2003; Corn, 2003; Dean 2004; Waldman, 2004). As I indicate in *Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy* (Chapters 5 and 6), Big, Bold, and Brazen Lies characterized the distinctive discourse and strategy of the Bush-Cheney 2004 campaign (Kellner, 2005).

In a *New York Times* op-ed piece, “The Dishonesty Thing,” Paul Krugman wrote that the key election issue was a “pattern of lies... on policy issues, from global warming to the war in Iraq.” Krugman recounts how years ago when he began questioning Bush administration figures on tax cuts, the deficit, and other economic issues, he and other critics were denounced as “shrill.” Citing a variety of establishment economic figures and reports, Krugman says that these documents revealed that he and other Bush critics were right and that the Bush administration was lying about their economic policies, using “fuzzy math” and fake figures to clothe the dubious results of their policies. Worrying that Bush’s

economic policies might lead to disaster and without any indication that the Bush administration had begun to identify solutions for the proliferating foreign trade deficit and skyrocketing deficit they had created, Krugman concluded, "Some not usually shrill people think that Mr. Bush will simply refuse to face reality until it comes crashing in: Paul Volcker, the former Federal Reserve chairman, says there's a 75 percent chance of a financial crisis in the next five years. Nobody knows what Mr. Bush would really do about taxes and spending in a second term. What we do know is that on this, as on many matters, he won't tell the truth."<sup>3</sup>

For Bob Herbert of the *New York Times*, Bush's Big Lie was the war on Iraq, a disastrous policy that has now killed more than 2,000 young Americans and placed the United States in a Vietnamesque quagmire. Seething with anger, Herbert cited the previous day's *Times*, which published photos of the first 1,000 who died, "They were sent off by a president who ran and hid when he was a young man and his country was at war. They fought bravely and died honorably. But as in Vietnam, no amount of valor or heroism can conceal the fact that they were sent off under false pretenses to fight a war that is un-winnable. How many thousands more will have to die before we acknowledge that President Bush's obsession with Iraq and Saddam Hussein has been a catastrophe for the United States?"<sup>4</sup>

In retrospect, the smears on Kerry by the Republican attack apparatus and Bush-Cheney's systematic lying throughout the campaign represents a low point in U.S. electoral politics. The studies in Kellner 2005 suggest that the conjuncture of corporate media which privilege entertainment and spectacle, the rise of a rightwing Republican media attack apparatus, and the systematic deployment of a politics of lying by the Bush administration have produced a crisis of democracy in the United States. Several convergent trends intersecting US media and politics have seriously undermined U.S. democracy: the corporate control of mainstream media, which biases dominant media toward conservatism and profit; an implosion of information and entertainment and the rise of a culture of media spectacle, which makes politics a form of entertainment; the rise of a right-wing Republican media propaganda and attack apparatus, which systematically deploys lies and deception to advance the agenda of conservative groups and interests; and an unparalleled assault on the press and manipulation of the media by the Bush administration.

The mainstream corporate media are largely subservient to corporate interests, follow the sensation of the moment, and rarely engage in the sort of investigative journalism that was once the ideal and that now takes place largely in the alternative sphere. Corporate media increasingly promote entertainment over news and information, and like the tabloids, framed by codes of media spectacle (Kellner, 2003). The result is a crisis in journalism as media move more and more for the bottom-line and neglect more serious issues in favor of tabloid

and soft news “human interest” stories. In addition, there have been major ethics concerns, such as plagiarism, charged against the elite media and an intense rightwing critique of their failings and alleged “liberal biases” that have forced major figures like the head of the New York Times, the president of CNN, and major figures in CBS’s *60 Minutes* to resign, and venerable anchor Dan Rather to retire early.

Moreover, one of the major developments of the past decade has been the rise of an ever-expanding right-wing Republican media machine, ranging from the *Wall Street Journal* and the conservative press to the Rupert Murdoch-owned *Fox TV*, talk radio, and the extreme right sector on the Internet, all of which together disseminate propaganda of a scope and virulence never before seen in U.S. history.<sup>5</sup> Expanding significantly since the 1980s, the Republican propaganda machine has cultivated a group of ideological storm troopers who loudly support Bush-Cheney policies and attack those who criticize them. These extremists are impervious to argument, ignore facts and analysis, and demonize as unpatriotic anyone who challenges Bush-Cheney policies. Groomed on Fox TV and right-wing talk radio, they verbally assault anyone who does not march in lockstep with the administration and insist upon waging an ideological war against so-called secularists, liberals, feminists, gays and lesbians, and other dissenters. These rightwing ideological warriors allow no disparagement of Bush and Cheney and refuse civil dialogue, preferring denunciation and invective.

Although the mainstream corporate media are vilified as “liberal” by the right-wing attack machine, in fact, mainstream journalists are easily intimidated when the right-wing army e-mails, calls, writes, and harasses any corporate media source that goes too far in criticizing the Bush-Cheney regime. Whenever corporate media has criticized the Bush-Cheney team, they have been subject to fierce attack by administration officials and their supporters. As an example of Bush administration intimidation of corporate media, Ryan Lizza dissected the Bush-Cheney closing strategy and how they targeted specific media that criticized them for attack:

...the White House has always relied on the press to convey Bush’s message to readers and viewers in a relatively unmediated fashion. That has proved more difficult this year due to a surge in coverage that fact-checks what the candidates are saying. This development has hurt Bush more than Kerry because the president’s strategy is to destroy his opponent’s credibility, a tactic that, ironically enough, has relied disproportionately on false statements. The Bushies have become so frustrated by the fact-checking of the president’s statements that a spokesman told the *Washington Post*’s Howard Kurtz, ‘The Bush campaign should be able to make an argument without having it reflexively dismissed as distorted or inaccurate by the biggest papers in the country.’

In response to the media's new obsession with truth-squading the candidates, the Republican National Committee's opposition research department has started to do something remarkable: going negative on the press. 'RNC Research Briefings,' e-mailed to hundreds of reporters, now regularly target members of the media. On October 6, the RNC put 'Hardball' host Chris Matthews, a former staffer for House Speaker Tip O'Neill, in its sights. 'DEMOCRAT CHRIS MATTHEWS' SELECTIVE ANALYSIS,' read the headline on a three-page press release that accused Matthews of erroneously claiming Cheney had contradicted himself during the debate when he denied tying September 11 to Saddam Hussein. Accompanying the release, the RNC posted a video online attacking Matthews. A few days later, Republicans took issue with *The New York Times*' Elisabeth Bumiller's accurate statement that, despite Bush's claims, Kerry 'essentially voted for one large tax increase, the Clinton tax bill of 1993.' 'THE NEW YORK TIMES SHADES THE TRUTH,' read the headline of a press release the RNC quickly put out. Next up was Ron Suskind, who wrote a critical piece in *The New York Times Magazine*. 'LIBERAL DEMOCRAT SUSKIND HAS CREATIVITY BUT NOT FACTS,' the RNC noted. A few days later Paul Krugman became the RNC's target. In Suskind's and Krugman's cases, the oppo was unusually personal and included unflattering pictures of the men, the kind that candidates dig up of their opponents, not of journalists.

The fact that the RNC is now devoting a good deal of its time to attacking reporters speaks volumes about how much Bush is relying on negative, unchecked distortions to secure a second term<sup>6</sup>

The Bush administration has indeed been ruthless throughout their reign against media voices that have spoken out against them. Karen Hughes, Karl Rove, and other Bush operatives have relentlessly browbeaten any reporter who dared criticize the Bush administration. Few critics noticed that the Bush administration had carried through a paradigm shift in presidential and media politics. Previously, the media and the administration in power had engaged in a complex courtship ritual with both sides trying to seduce and manipulate the other. The mainstream media needed sources and material, and the administration needed the media to get across its messages. All this changed with the Bush administration, which viciously attacked any reporters who contested its statements or positions. If a media institution broadcasted or published material deemed hostile by the Bush team, their shock troops bombarded the offending institution with e-mails, phone calls, and letters, attacking them for exhibiting "bias" against Bush. This helps explain why the mainstream corporate media were so reluctant to contradict Bush campaign distortions and lies and why they did not do more serious investigative reporting into the scandalous backgrounds of Bush and Cheney and the striking failures of their administration. For the most part, the cowardly mainstream media, concerned with reputation and profits, mainly

submitted to Bush-Cheney-Rove. Through gang coercion, the media sacrificed their journalistic integrity by rarely refuting Bush-Cheney lies except in the mildest possible terms. As a result, few administrations have ever so successfully controlled the media.

In addition to cultivating rightwing media that broadcast their messages of the day and intimidate the mainstream corporate media, the Bush administration has created fake media and bought conservative commentators to push their policies. During the 2004 debate on Medicare, the Bush administration created simulated video news releases (VNRs) to television featuring Karen Ryan “reporting” on Medicare; it later came out that Ryan was a U.S. government employee posing as a television reporter. A subsequent investigative report indicated that at least twenty federal agencies made and distributed hundreds of video news releases to local television stations that were broadcast as news segments and not government propaganda and that the Bush administration spent \$254 million of tax payers money on public relations contracts that helped produce the video news tapes which provided propaganda for Bush administration policies.<sup>7</sup>

The U.S. General Accounting Office ruled that the VNRs violated bans on government-funded “publicity and propaganda.” Soon after, however, the Bush administration Justice Department ruled that the government should ignore the GAO claim that the video news releases were illegal.<sup>8</sup> In early 2005, it was also revealed that the Bush administration paid conservative commentator Armstrong Williams to promote its No Child Left Behind Act, and paid two other conservative commentators to promote its family policy. Thus, once again, taxpayer money was used to fund conservative causes and to help spread opinion supporting Bush administration policies in the media.

But most astonishing of all, the Bush administration provided press credentials to a fake journalist who worked for Talon News service that was barely a front for conservative propaganda. The Bush White House provided a press pass to avowed conservative partisan “Jeff Gannon” who was a regular in the White House Briefing Room, where he was frequently called upon by Bush administration press secretary Scott McClellan whenever the questions from the press corps got too hot for comfort. After he manufactured quotes by Senators Clinton and Reid in White House press conferences, bloggers found out that his real name was “James Guckert” and that he also ran gay porn sites and worked as a gay escort. Although “Gannon” was a frequent presence, lobbying softball questions in the White House briefing room, his press colleagues never questioned his credentials, leaving investigative reporting to bloggers, serving as yet another example of the collapse of the investigative functions of the mainstream media.<sup>9</sup>

### Alternative Media

What is the role of a free and independent press in a democratic society? Is it to be a passive conduit responsible only for the delivery of information between a government and its people? Is it to aggressively print allegation and rumor independent of accuracy or fairness? Is it to show boobies? No. The role of a free press is to be the people's eyes and ears, providing not just information but access, insight and, most importantly, context.

—*The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart, and *America (The Book)*

Over the past decade or more, the investigative function of traditional journalism has largely fallen to alternative media and the Internet. The only way that a democratic social order can be maintained is for the mainstream media to assume their democratic function of critically discussing all issues of public concern and social problems from a variety of viewpoints and fostering spirited public debate, accompanied by the development of vigorous and competent investigative and alternative media. The democratic imperative for mainstream corporate press and broadcasting to provide a variety of views on issues of public interest and controversy has been increasingly sacrificed, as has their responsibility to serve as a check against excessive government or corporate power and corruption. As I have documented (Kellner, 1990; 2001; 2003a; 2005), there is a crisis of democracy in the United States in part because the mainstream corporate media have been biased toward Republicans and conservatives over the past two decades. Mainstream corporate media tend to promote the interests of the corporations that own them, which tend to be pro-market and anti-regulation and have largely advanced the agenda of corporate institutions and conservative politics.

To remedy this situation, there must be a strengthening of the media reform movement, recognition of the importance of media politics in the struggle for democratization, the creation of a just society, and support and development of alternative media.<sup>10</sup> Democratizing the media system will require development of a dynamic reform movement and recognition by all progressive social movements of the importance of invigorating the media system for forward-looking social change and addressing urgent social problems and issues. This process will involve sustained critique of the corporate media; calls for re-regulation; and the revitalization of public television, cultivation of community and public radio, improved public access television, an expansion of investigative and public service journalism, and full democratic utilization of the Internet. Since corporations control the mainstream press, broadcasting, and other major institutions of culture and communication, there is little hope that the corporate media will be democratized without major pressure or increased government

regulation of a sort that is not on the horizon in the present moment in most parts of the world.

As Robert Parry has argued, the Right in the US has moved from a position of marginality after the defeat of Barry Goldwater in 1964 to political hegemony through developing a network of think tanks, media projects, and print publications that have advanced conservative ideas and helped educate and organize a conservative movement.<sup>11</sup> The Left and progressives also need to develop a strong network of think tanks and alternative media to combat the Right in the struggle for hegemony both within the US and globally.

In the short term, the Internet, in contrast to broadcasting institutions mostly controlled by conservatives and giant corporations, provides potential for a democratic revitalization of the public sphere. The Internet makes more information accessible to a greater number of people, more easily, and from a wider array of sources than any instrument of information and communication in history. It is constantly astonishing to discover the extensive array of material available, articulating every conceivable point of view and providing news, opinion, and sources of a striking variety and diversity. Moreover, the Internet allows two-way communication and democratic participation in public dialogue; activity that is essential to producing a vital democracy.

One of the major contradictions of the current era is that for the wired world at least, and increasingly the public at large, a rich and diverse information environment is expanding, consisting of a broad spectrum of radio and television broadcasting networks; print media and publications; and the global village of the Internet, which itself contains the most varied and extensive sources of information and entertainment ever assembled in a single medium. The Internet can send disparate types and sources of information and images instantly throughout the world and is increasingly being used by a variety of progressive and oppositional groups (see Kellner, 1999; Best & Kellner, 2001; and Kahn & Kellner, 2003).

Still, the majority of people get their news and information from a highly ideological and limited corporate media, creating a major division between the informed and uninformed in the contemporary era. Of course, right-wing and reactionary forces can and have used the Internet to promote their political agendas as well. In a short time, one can easily access an exotic witch's brew of websites maintained by the Ku Klux Klan and myriad neo-Nazi assemblages, including the Aryan Nation, various militia groups, and the right-wing Republican attack apparatus. Hence, the Internet is a contested terrain with progressive, reactionary, and corporate forces using the technology for their conflicting agendas. To be sure, much of the world is not yet wired, many people do not even read, and different inhabitants in various parts of the globe receive their information and culture in very dissimilar ways through varying sources, media,

and forms. Thus, the type and quality of information vary tremendously, depending on an individual's access and ability to properly interpret and contextualize it.

Democracy, however, requires informed citizens and access to information and thus the viability of democracy is dependent on citizens seeking out crucial information, having the ability to access and appraise it, and to engage in public conversations about issues of importance. Democratic media reform and alternative media are thus crucial to revitalizing and even preserving the democratic project in the face of powerful corporate and political forces. How media can be democratized and what alternative media can be developed will of course be different in various parts of the world, but without a democratic media politics and alternative media, democracy itself cannot survive in a vigorous form, nor will a wide range of social problems be engaged or even addressed.

Alternative media needs to be connected with progressive movements to revitalize democracy and bring an end to the current conservative hegemony. After the defeat of Barry Goldwater in 1964 when conservatives were routed and appeared to be down for the count, they built up a movement of alternative media and political organizations; liberals and progressives now face the same challenge. In the current situation, we cannot expect much help from the corporate media and need to develop ever more vigorous alternative media. The past several years have seen many important steps in the fields of documentary film, digital video and photography, community radio, public access television, an always expanding progressive print media, and an ever-growing liberal and progressive Internet and blogosphere. While the right has more resources to dedicate to these projects, the growth of progressive democratic public spheres has been impressive. Likewise, the energy, political organization, and finances mobilized to defeat the Bush-Cheney Gang were impressive, but more needs to be done to defeat the conservatives, building on the achievements of the past years.

One result of the 2004 election has been the de-centering and marginalizing of the importance of the corporate media punditocracy by Internet and blogosphere sources. A number of websites and blogs have been dedicated to deconstructing mainstream corporate journalism, taking apart everyone from the right-wing spinners on Fox to reporters for the *New York Times*. An ever-proliferating number of websites have been attacking mainstream pundits, media institutions, and misreporting; with the possible exception of the *New York Times*'s Paul Krugman, Internet and blog sources were often much more interesting, insightful, and perhaps even more influential than the overpaid, underinformed, and often incompetent mainstream corporate media figures. For example, every day the incomparable Bob Somerby on [www.dailyhowler.com](http://www.dailyhowler.com), savages mainstream media figures, disclosing their ignorance, bias, and

incompetence while a wide-range of other web sites and web blogs contain media critique and alternative information and views.<sup>12</sup>

As a response there have been fierce critiques of the blogosphere by mainstream media pundits and sources, although many in the corporate mainstream are developing blogs, appropriating the genre for themselves. Yet mainstream corporate broadcasting media, and especially television, continue to exert major political influence. The ongoing critique of corporate media must be linked with efforts at reform and the development of alternatives, as activists continue to create ever better critical and oppositional media linked to ever-expanding progressive movements. For without adequate information, intelligent debate, or criticism of the established institutions and parties, and meaningful alternatives, democracy is but an ideological phantom, without life or substance.

### **Concluding Comments**

Cultural studies thus needs to engage critical media studies and social theory to dissect and critique the current system of politics, culture, and the media in the U.S. today. As my analysis suggests, cultural studies needs to interrogate the press, system of broadcasting, and Internet to trace the role of multiple media in contemporary politics and to embrace a concept of alternative media to address the crisis of democracy in the U.S. today. Citizens are not getting adequate news and information and those seeking radical social change must seek out and create alternative media.

Media literacy and pedagogy should teach how to read and critically dissect newspapers, TV, radio, the Internet, and other media of news and information to enable students to become active and engaged democratic citizens. While early cultural studies by the Birmingham school included a focus on critically reading newspapers, TV news and information programs, and the images of politics, much cultural studies of the past decades has focused on media entertainment, consumption, and audience response to specific media programs. This enterprise is valuable and important, but it should not replace or marginalize taking on the system of media news and information as well. A comprehensive cultural studies will interrogate news and entertainment, journalism and consumption, and should include media studies as well as textual studies and audience reception studies.

In interrogating the role of the media in Election 2004, one would need to focus on religion and values as well as news and media spectacle.<sup>13</sup> Cultural studies has not adequately engaged religion or often used philosophy in its analyses. In order to talk of a crisis of democracy one needs a normative concept of democracy to fully understand the role of the media and importance of an

informed and active citizenry. To criticize any form of culture and politics one needs a standpoint of critique and concepts like truth and falsity to dissect lying and mendacity.<sup>14</sup> In the current conjuncture, philosophy has merged with theory and cultural studies needs to constantly interrogate its basic concepts, sharpened in actual analysis and theoretical debate. Cultural studies has been a home and resource for theory since its beginning and needs philosophy and theory to add a self-reflexive and critical dimension and to develop its theoretical resources and problematics.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This section and the following develop material from *Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy* (Kellner, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Halperin's memo was cited in <http://www.drudgereport.com/mh.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Krugman, "The Dishonesty Thing," *New York Times*, September 10, 2004 at <http://www.pkarchive.org/column/091004.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Bob Herbert, "How Many Deaths Will It Take?" *New York Times*, September 10, 2004 at

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F20616FE3E540C738DDDA00894DC404482>.

<sup>5</sup> The rise and growing influence of a right-wing Republican media propaganda and attack apparatus has been well documented in Alterman (2000 & 2003); Brock (2004); Conason (2003); Miller (2004); and Waldman (2004). In *Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy*, I update and expand my critique of right-wing and corporate media and show how they have relentlessly promoted the agenda of the Bush administration.

<sup>6</sup> Ryan Lizza, "Backward," *New Republic*, November 1, 2004 at <http://www.tnr.com/doc.mhtml?i=20041101&s=lizza110104>.

<sup>7</sup> See David Barstow and Robin Stein, "THE MESSAGE MACHINE: How the Government Makes News; Under Bush, a New Age of Prepackaged News," *New York Times*, March 13, 2005 at

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F50914FC3E580C708DDDA00894DD404482>.

<sup>8</sup> See Laura Miller, "The 2004 Falsies Awards," *AlterNet*, December 30, 2004 at <http://www.alternet.org/mediaculture/20865/>.

<sup>9</sup> As Eric Boehlert has noted in "See no Gannon, hear no Gannon, speak no Gannon. Why has the mainstream media ignored the White House media access scandal?," *Salon*, February 25, 2005, the mainstream media ignored reporting on the story of a fake White House correspondent with an incredibly colorful past, as well as failing to investigate the phenomenon despite intense interest in the

Internet and alternative media at

[http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2005/02/25/gannon\\_coverage/print.html](http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2005/02/25/gannon_coverage/print.html). For a thorough investigation of Gannon/Guckert's bizarre life as an Internet porn entrepreneur, gay escort, and fake reporter, see Michael Dietz, "Becoming Jeff Gannon," AlterNet, April 22, 2005 at

<http://www.alternet.org/mediaculture/21829/>.

<sup>10</sup> For more detailed proposals for democratizing the media and producing alternative media and politics, see Kellner (1990 & 2001); and McChesney (1997, 2000, & 2004). See also Jeffrey Chester and Gary O. Larson, "A 12-Step Program for Media Democracy," *Nation*, July 23, 2002.

<sup>11</sup> See Robert Parry, "The Left's Media Miscalculation," April 29, 2005 at <http://www.consortiumnews.com/2005/042805.html> and Parry 2004.

<sup>12</sup> See Somerby's *Daily Howler* columns for December 7–17, at <http://www.dailyhowler.com/archives-2004.shtml>. See also my own blog at <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/courses/ed253a/blogger.php>, which links many good blogs and websites.

<sup>13</sup> On the role of religion in Election 2004 - an issue that clearly extends beyond the scope of this paper - see *Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy* (Kellner, 2005). For a subsequent study of religion in contemporary U.S. politics, see my "The Media and Death: The Case of Terri Schaivo and the Pope," *Flow*, Vol. 2, Nr. 3 (May 2005) at

<http://idg.communication.utexas.edu/flow/?jot=view&id=745>.

<sup>14</sup> On the role of philosophy in cultural studies, see Douglas Kellner, "Cultural Studies and Philosophy: An Intervention," in Toby Miller, editor *A Companion to Cultural Studies*, Cambridge and Boston, Blackwell, 2001: 139-153. For a normative concept of democracy and informed citizenship, see Kellner 1991 and 2005; on truth and mendacity in politics, see my forthcoming "Lying in Politics: The Case of George W. Bush and Iraq."

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