

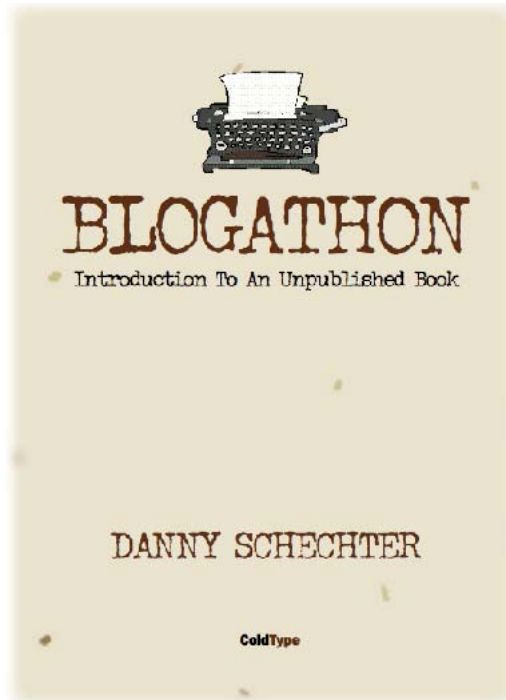


BLOGATHON

Introduction To An Unpublished Book

DANNY SCHECHTER

ColdType



Danny Schechter is a television producer and independent filmmaker who also writes and speaks about media issues. His books include "Embedded: Weapons of Mass Deception: How the Media Failed to Cover the Iraq War" (Prometheus Books, October 2003); "Media Wars: News At A Time of Terror" (Rowman & Littlefield, 2003); "The More You Watch, The Less You Know" (Seven Stories Press) and "News Dissector: Passions, Pieces and Polemics" (Akashic) Books and Electron Press). He is the executive editor of MediaChannel.org, the world's largest online media issues network, and recipient of the Society of Professional Journalists' 2001 Award for Excellence in Documentary Journalism.

Schechter's latest movie is In Debt We Trust (www.indebtwetrust.com)

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It is 5:55 a.m. in midtown Manhattan

and a slightly overweight, bedraggled figure is lumbering in the dark from bedroom to living room in a loft he endearingly refers to as his 'museum of pre-revolutionary culture.' He reaches for the cable remote. Where is it? Under the couch again, next to a book he's been searching for. He yawns, scratches, and stretches. It's just about six in the morning; time for the day's first media fix.

Click.

The actor James Earl Jones is pumping phone service for a company called Verizon, a made up name if there ever was one. When his spiel ends, CNN's news day get underway beginning with a tease/capsule of the morning's four big stories.

Roll the open. Sound the news music. Cut to the perky anchor.

Today's news sounds just like yesterday's. More killings in Iraq in an unending body count. Then that tall basketball player and his short lawyer walk into the courtroom building again – what are they wearing today? She's brisk; he's loping with none of the energy that we see when he drives that Laker ball to the basket. That question again: was that fling in the night consensual or not?

Then, there are quick shots of fallen CEOs testifying in another court and, finally, in "culture" news, Madonna is unveiling her new children's book. So much for news. Cut to a commercial urging viewers to tell their doctors to prescribe a purple pill.

Next up: chirpy Chad with more weather "reports" than anyone needs. His technology moves more maps and clouds quicker than ever. And now he has that Doppler radar and whooshing animations all tracking one of the big storms that seem always to be menacing this part of the planet. How cool and meteorological of CNN to provide constant updates: the more extreme the weather, the more face time Chad gets, but he doesn't tell us that he gets most of his information directly from the government's much bigger weather computer.

At this point, our protagonist's fingers do the walking, changing channels again. Off we

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go down the dial to the BBC, click, MSNBC, click, and then there's Fox. This is his daily breakfast of headlines, and "breaking," and not so breaking, "news." Most of these stories will be "updated" and repackaged to be read out by dishy blondes and white men in suits throughout the day.

This is television, but when watched closely, you see it's a mostly non-visual environment. Chatter and opinions are pervasive; footage and real storytelling rare. The former is cheap, the latter costs money to shoot and edit.

Today, there are reporters offering stand-ups from Baghdad rooftops to anchors hidden behind set-piece desks. There's an overheated Imus on MSNBC scowling and grouching about the dummies he has on his show; and over at Fox, a quartet of "friends" prattle on, the jock posing as analyst, the comedian adding colorful commentary with the anchorwoman just back from her seventh pregnancy and "Da Judge," opining on subjects that have nothing to do with the law. A black newsreader interrupts with more F&B – "fair and balanced" news, illustrated by graphics with the latest comings and goings of President Bush a constant highlight.

Over at BBC World, there is a dryer, more serious tone with stories from the old outposts of Empire. This morning it is Sri Lanka with a stuffy expert who does a context-fill in an upper-class Oxford accent. After about nine minutes, it's on to business news and then the latest cricket scores and football results.

And so, TV-obsessed Americans imbibe the news of the new day. The majority watch local news for traffic jams, fatality counts and gossip. Some years ago a local news study found about half these local "newscasts" carry no news at all.

As you probably guessed the 'he' in this story is me, bogging before breakfast, Danny Schechter, "your news dissector," reporting for duty without a salute. Most days, I am surrounded by crumpled newspapers, and unread magazines stained with coffee or cereal and the other edibles that enable me to kickstart my brain into gear for another day of media watching and media making.

Some time ago, in the last century and in what now seems to be a personal universe that is far, far way, I was dubbed the News Dissector, a nom de media guerre that gives my compulsive media addiction a vocational role and maybe even an aura of a higher calling.

Dissecting is usually associated with the frog world, not the news world, but there it is: the aspiration to slice below the surface of current events and pick away at the sinews of what passes for journalism.

On September 11, literally as the twin towers collapsed, I started writing what I thought would be a column focused on news coverage; it quickly turned into a blog because it was updated so often as events changed. For some readers, that blog became a slog since my daily posts, rants and raves often hit 3,000 words. Not all of it was original scribbling, since

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I quoted and digested others liberally and directed readers to a wide range of sources. While others read the morning paper, I was and still am writing/editing/aggregating my own, with links and resources to boot.

Blogging is made possible by computer software packages that makes updating and linking easy. It enables writers to keep "posting" with factoids or more elaborated ideas. Most bloggers are not professional journalists at all. And most blogs are platforms for opinion and anecdotes and resumes and literary personal travelogues. It's a medium well designed for an ADD culture where anybody and everybody has something to say.

When I started just a few years ago, blogging was just emerging inside a media system with more channels than choices, more sources than voices. The whole phenomenon is a reaction against and an improvement on an elite run media system in which professionals dominated the reporting of news and the rest of us consumed it.

Those days are going, if not gone, with waves of people telling their own stories and offering their own take on the stories of others. It represents a vast democratization, a modern reincarnation of Mao's dictum to let a thousand flowers bloom. His motive was to flush out critics and then destroy them, but today's citizen journalists are in part out to improve and in some cases surplant a media world that has lost credibility and is in desperate need of being shaken up from below.

At first the paragons of the mainstream media dismissed blogging, challenging its credibility on the grounds of questionable accuracy. But as the accuracy of major news outlets themselves began to be questioned, they decided to join in. Today many newspapers offer their own blogs or encourage staffers to blog – even CNN even has introduced its version of "citizen journalism.

Years earlier as a radio newscaster, I had developed an 'anyone-can-do-it-but-few-do' dissecting methodology in which I compared and contrasted news sources – something few journalists do. In those years during the Vietnam War, our media took sides against "enemy forces." The "enemy" was always making claims or alleging crimes; the US government was invariably stating facts, "insisting" and "explaining." During the Watergate follies, the Nixon Administration was often taken far more seriously than its critics until that house of cards collapsed.

As I followed the TV news every day, I came to see how it was driven by institutionally established routines and patterns of coverage. Formats ruled, with news reports called "packages" cut to pre-assigned time limitations. Formulas designed by consultants structured the presentations, which were built around the state of the sets and promoted with graphic branding liners, special music, flashy animations, and look-alike, sound-alike themes. It's all designed to be modular and interchangeable. News language aspires to be perceived as authoritative and objective, stressing terms like fairness and balance. It isn't.

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And yet when I looked at stories more closely as they flew across the TV screen or as they paraded across the front pages, I could see structural biases and an ideological orientation. I saw who was worthy of being quoted and who wasn't. I could tell which sources had legitimacy and which did not. I could detect the ways that conventional views colored the news while other views were marginalized. I could sniff out the point of view that was often buried in the 'on the one hand and on the other hand' paradigms of reporting.

In the years that followed, I moved from being a media critic to a media maker and then a media "heavy" as an on-air personality, TV reporter, and then producer. I moved from blasting network TV from the outside to trying to change it, or at least influence it, on the inside. I came to know and like some people in the industry and learn from them. And yet at the same time, I felt estranged. I sensed that I didn't really belong because I wasn't an insider and didn't aspire to become one.

Part of the reason for that has to do with class. Back in the thirties, forties and fifties, newsmen (and then women) often came from the working class – as I did. They were suspicious of big shots, lived in regular neighborhoods, drank at bars with locals, and covered stories without pretensions or an identification with the kinds of power that came with the transition of news from a racket or a craft into an elite profession and a business.

This is not to suggest that there was ever a "golden age" of news, but with corporatization, media concentration, and journalists aspiring to upward mobility, trading in their Thom McAnn's for Bruno Magli's, the media world began to change. As media structures changed, so did the zeitgeist and soon entertainment values were in command. Celebrity-chasing became a national pastime. Being risk-averse was in, muckraking perspectives out. As the gap between those at the top of the media business and those that toiled in its boiler rooms widened, the sense of media with a mission diluted.

I joined the media to spotlight the problems of the world and discovered that the media was one of those problems. It was a problem that media, for obvious reasons, had little interest in drawing attention to.

I found myself running up against gatekeepers who wanted to do what everyone else was doing. Small stories interested them more than big ones. As far as they were concerned, no one cared about a lot of the issues that moved me – human rights, fights for freedom and social justice. Individually, they might express a concern, but as decision-makers, they avoided being too controversial and shied away from rocking the boat. TV programmers would tell me how much they admired me, but then explained that the programs I wanted to cover were, well, "not for us." It soon became clear they were not for anyone.

Change was in the air while substance was often off the air. Foreign bureaus were closing and documentaries were being shuttled off to cable outlets with small audiences. "Reality-based" shows replaced programs that tackled more uncomfortable realities, such as world poverty or AIDS or wars in places like Bosnia or Burundi. I left a network show for a company

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that promoted a "global vision." My salary fell as my work became both more interesting and problematic. We became like the pioneers in the "wild west" who didn't eat unless they killed some game. We became small businessmen in an age of increasingly mega cartels. We had some successes, but far more frustrations, often having to raise the money to do a show, fight to get it on the air, and, then, struggle to pay ourselves.

We soon learned how high the deck was stacked against us and our idealistic enterprise. It was then we realized that the more important problem was right in front of our eyes – the media itself. We formed Mediachannel.org and seven years later we are still alive. It is there that my blog/newscast appears every day. Thousands subscribe to it on e-mail; many others check it out on the web site.

But I know there are others out there who might want a dead trees edition – a book of what I have been writing about since we invaded Iraq and found our own Waterloo in the sand. This will be my fourth blog-based book: the first, **Hail to the Thief** deals with the media's role in the 2000 election, arguing that we now live in a mediaocracy that affects our elections and frames the public discourse and agenda. The second book, **Media Wars**, deals with news in a time of terror and shows how the events of 911 were used by the government and the media to justify flag waving instead of reporting)

EMBEDDED: Weapons of Mass Deception: How the Media Failed to Cover the War on Iraq was designed and published online by Tony Sutton of Canada's ColdType.net. We struggled with it largely because I was better at writing than editing and shaping the narrative. He was patient and created a design which Prometheus Books used when it brought out a hardcover edition. Tony must be a glutton for punishment since he has invited me to do another.

My latest books are **The Death of the Media and the Fight to Save Democracy** (Melville House Publishing 2005) and **When News Lies: Media Complicity and The Iraq War** (Select Books), which also includes the film **WMD (Weapons of Mass Deception)**; and You can read about the body of my work online at: <http://www.newsdissector.com/dissectorville>

That was the origin of this collection. I am calling it **Blogathon**. It includes excerpts from my blogs as well as articles written for The Globalvision News Network and other outlets. All of this work has been done for very little by way of financial compensation. The satisfaction I derive is from the work of writing and the responses from readers. So please share yours. Write Dissector@mediachannel.org. And if you like what you are reading, do what the people of Spain did after receiving SMS messages that called upon them to throw out a government that was lying to them.

Those messages ended with a simple request that many read as a command:

Passalo.

Pass it on.

THIS INDY MEDIA IMPERATIVE

In February 2007, four years after the invasion of Iraq, and after decades of volatility in the media world with great newspapers losing circulation and TV network news losing ratings, the big guns of American public television turned their attention to the problem with four hours of prime-time programming that framed the politics of the issue almost exclusively in mainstream terms and about conflicts between mainstream media outlets and the government.

In commenting on how Frontline, the best documentary strand on PBS covered the issue in their NEWS WARS series, Rory O'Connor, who has produced for the series noted:

"News War's biggest flaw lies in its overall approach. The media here is all New York Times and Washington Post; MSM bigwigs like Bill Keller and Len Downie, Judy Miller and Bob Woodward, coupled with their counterparts in politics, like White House advisers Dan Bartlett and Mark McKinnon. There are few bloggers – Jay Rosen gets two lines – and no independent voices... The fact that an entirely different narrative and critique of the real "news war" is missing from the Frontline effort means the producers missed the story – or at the very least a good chunk of it."

Frontline's approach was not unique or unexpected. It was conventional and predictable – a common feature of public television – but not surprising because when many media outlets look in the mirror, they tend to only see themselves. Their worldview is framed by their own aspirations to be taken seriously in the elite media world, and hence miss the big media story of our times made possible by the internet, generational shifts, global developments and the rise of "new media."

The mushrooming of the independent media in all its many guises, formats and forms, on all sides of the political spectrum is harder to describe because it often lacks established and revered institutions or brands even though some of the most dynamic media companies like Google, Yahoo, YouTube etc were largely unknown a decade ago.

Years ago when some fifty companies owned most media outlets, they were staffed by armies of full time professionals, employees in unionized and non-unionized jobs and others under contract. It was an industry with a circulation and stable advertising base. Everyone understood the way it worked and its revenue model.

Today, all that has changed or is changing. Companies have downsized and are serviced increasingly by an insecure force of free lancers or suppliers to whom work is outsourced. The mass media has fragmented. It has become decentralized even as the big companies continue to merge and purge.

More and more professionals are independent contractors---authors, editors, writers,

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designers, producers and crew members---going from job to job, project to project. As the companies avoid paying benefits, many find their standards of living shrinking.

Outside the mainstream, as progressive web outlets proliferate, a cottage industry of small production companies, magazines, publishing houses, and publications have sprung up often defined by the niches they appeal to and the technologies that power them. Their outlets are smaller and feature the work of passionate journalists and media makers who often work more out of a sense of mission than for the money.

Who expected, even as this new century began, that we would soon have more than FIFTY MILLION bloggers in the world and that words like citizen journalism would be seen as both threatening and exciting in the new media order. The old media is buying up the new when it can, or competing with it by co-opting some of its features but the real battleground has moved from a traditional standoff between government and the press to an internal struggle, within the industry and each company, over how to define the future. Will our media world continue to assume the hierarchal top-down big business dominated commercial approach or is there an emerging alternative that is more democratic, diverse and engaging to audiences?

Much of the commentary about media today focuses on the maneuver and machinations of the moguls in charge and the celebrities they create. It is about the big media machine even when it is critical of it. Little of it tells the story of that other world that is opposing it – the emerging independent media.

It's a tricky term of course because true independence seems to be reserved more for those who can afford to pay to have their say. The rest of us are usually dependent – dependent on funding for program making and then for access to distribution and marketing support. We live in an interdependent culture in a multi-linked world and thus are always dependent on others in some way.

To be honest independence in media making is associated more with dissenting outlooks, with standing up for beliefs. Its about eing critical and conscious and willing to fight for the right to speak and be heard – often against the gate keepers and upholders of conventional thinking and political orthodoxy..

Any overview or survey of the dimensions of the "independent sector" will be quickly out of date because it is so varied and always morphing thanks to the engine of technological change and fashion. The web itself is changing as it becomes more visual and mobile, converging with the television and telephone. The broadband era is transforming "old media" as the writer Michael Crichton foresaw years ago when he compared modern media to a dinosaur "on the road to extinction."

'I am referring to the American media," he wrote in 1995. "And I use the term extinction lit-

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erally. To my mind, it is likely that what we now understand as the mass media will be gone with the next ten years. Vanished without a trace."

His prediction may be off by a decade or two but it is playing itself out, and I am in good position to write about it because I am right in the middle of it. I am a soldier in this media conflict that often resembles a media war between media and other institutions, between competing forms of media and within media companies themselves.

I have lived a media life in the trenches of this fight from my early days as a student journalist in the 1960s through a career that has included stints as a print journalist, radio newscaster, on-air TV reporter, cable and network news producer, independent documentary director, website editor and globally known blogger.

Despite all the ups and downs in the media world and my own life, what is not changing as rapidly is the inner life, history, experiences and outlook of those outsiders and iconoclasts who are the real pioneers in a business that claims that content is king.

This book is about a world that I cover and know well. It is about some of my own experiences as an outsider turned insider who became an outsider again. It is personal and political chronicling a story I know best because I lived it and am still living it. It reports on my media adventure as an activist turned participatory journalist, but also as the co-founder of an independent media company now marking its twentieth anniversary. It is written not just to chronicle a tumultuous past to hopefully encourage younger people to take a similar path while being aware of all of its potential for change, even "glory" well as its many problems and pitfalls.

It takes a media maven to spot media fraud – a couple of decades in journalism as a reporter, writer, editor, radio news director, TV correspondent, local TV producer, CNN producer, ABC News producer and independent filmmaker/program maker and on-line blogger has a way of sensitizing you to how the media works and doesn't work.

Add in a lifetime of news dissecting, critiquing and, more recently, writing books cataloguing media issues and interests, and you end up believing that your experience as a media warrior or survivor (depending on your daily experiences) qualifies you for more than the retirement dinner you will never have.

You begin to think that you have something to say – but what? Is there anything that has gone unsaid? Our media system could collapse under the sheer weight of all the tomes that have been published calling for a renewal of journalism and a reform of a system and industry badly in need of reform.

Many of my colleagues who labor inside the media beast have heard it all before. They agree with you privately that the system is broken but most feel stuck, or worse, indifferent. A mix of utilitarian self-satisfaction and insularity/insecurity pervades their media environ-

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ment. Some greet your critiques with cynicism because becoming jaded is often the personal cost of surviving in huge companies that increasingly operate as news factories. Individuals who have long been assimilated or seduced to join "the team" are rarely open to calls for self-reflection, much less change.

When you are part of a dominant news culture, that news culture becomes part of you. "All journalists are ignoramuses," H.L. Mencken once wrote, "and proud of it." I once heard Dan Rather quip about his colleagues (and himself): "Some of us are not educable."

As Norman Liebmann writes on the Ether Zone website: "Mark Twain said the reports of his death were greatly exaggerated. Similarly, the death of the mainstream media has been greatly over-reported, although, as Shakespeare put it, "'Tis a consummation devoutly to be wished."

Media plays a role in all of our lives; but the question is, what kind of role and what kind of media? Can we achieve mind over media or is the media now and forever a force that massages our minds?

This 'What is to Be Done' question arises after every speech I've ever given or film I have ever shown. How do you take on this beast? Is there anything we can do? To keep going we all need to believe that there are answers, strategies and tactics for fighting back against irresponsible media. We can no longer afford not to fight back.

Today, there is a growing media and democracy movement in America powered not only by a critique, but also by a program for change and a vision of what can be done. In January of this year, I was surprised to be acknowledged by the New York Times and invited to speak at its well-marketed "Arts & Leisure" weekend. The next weekend I was in Memphis Tennessee at media reform conference that brought 3000 activists, journalists, advocates and organizers to insist that transforming the media is essential to renewing our democracy – and possible. There I was surprised to be praised by TV news legend Bill Moyers in his keynote speech. A week later, I was discussing media issues the Sundance Film Festival and showing a new film about my career at the University of Utah. In this same period, Americans lost a great independent media voice I knew when columnist Molly Ivins succumbed to cancer.

Media reform is not a new idea, and it is not one fully shared yet by Democrats or even the left. In Bush's America bashing the president is a far more common impulse than analyzing and challenging a media system that legitimizes his rule even while pointing to its shortcomings.

Few can claim all their ideas as their own. Mine were influenced by my my friends, my family, my colleagues, my formal and informal education, and the struggles I have been, and continue to be, a part of. This book has grown, in part, out of my work for better media at


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MediaChannel.org, Globalvision and all the many media "homes" I have passed through in a career shaped more by conscience than commerce.

I have gone from the '60s to sixty and still have somewhat fading hopes that my media dreams will be realized. I watched (and participated) in the fall of racial segregation in our South and apartheid in Africa's South, South Africa; I resisted and covered the Vietnam War and am now challenging the one in Iraq.

I know that history is always happening. Nothing stands still. I know that the great Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci (after whom a street I saw is named in Bologna) was right when he called for "pessimism of the intelligence and optimism of the will."

Journalism has its own Halls of Shame and Fame. There is also a legacy of great work and important values. To honor those who have fought this fight before us and all those who fight it now, we need to engage – and not let go. We need to understand the impulse and contributions of independent media.



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