

MESSAGES

4

The Washington Post
Media Companion

The Washington Post

Writers Group

Thomas Beell

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Edited by Thomas Beell

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Preface to Messages 4

This has been a chaotic decade for the world's mass media. Technological, political, and economic forces that have swept the globe since the beginning of the 1990s have reshaped virtually every form of mass communication—from book publishing to movie making.

These changes can be seen in the way media organizations have been restructured and operated, as well as in the changes that have taken place in the media organizations' ownership. In some cases, the changes have led to the creation of exciting new media "products." In others, once successful publications, programs, and services have disappeared forever.

Since 1991, *The Washington Post* has been chronicling these changes for inclusion in its series *Media Companions*. This, the fourth edition of the series, focuses on the most significant or unusual developments that took place in the mid-1990s.

They include

- The sale of two of America's major television networks;
- A merger making the world's largest media company even larger;
- The rise of the World Wide Web as a serious competitor for readers and advertisers;
- An attempt by the U.S. Congress to censor the Internet;
- Drastic downsizing and cost-cutting at the nation's newspapers;
- A number of expensive "flops" from the Hollywood studios; and
- The growing popularity of "guttertalk" on radio.

It is clear that, despite the turmoil of recent years, some media institutions are thriving, while others won't make it to the next century. See whether you can figure out who will be the survivors as you read *Messages 4: The Washington Post Media Companion*.

We have selected 98 articles for this edition, all but eight of which were published in the *Post* during 1995 and 1996. One report, by former *Post* publisher

Katharine Graham, describes the paper's coverage of a terrorist act in April 1986. It remains as relevant today as when she wrote it.

We hope you find *Messages 4* as interesting and exciting as the mass media themselves.

Thomas L. Beell
Iowa State University

Preface to the First Edition

John Campbell launched the first successful American newspaper—the *Boston News-Letter*—in 1704. For fifteen years he enjoyed a monopoly in the colonies. Then, James Franklin, the more celebrated Benjamin's older brother, began publishing the *New-England Courant* and became America's first "media critic." Campbell's newspaper, he said in the first issue of the *Courant*, suffered from an excess of "dullness." Campbell responded with a denial and demanded chapter and verse. Franklin had the last word:

"[The critic] need not tell you where you're flat and dull; Your Works declare, 'tis in your skull."

In the subsequent history of the American media, criticism has had uneven traditions. Newspapers criticized one another vigorously and frequently in the 19th century. The *New York Courier and Inquirer* announced in 1836 that "we are compelled, for the first time, to soil our columns with an allusion to a beggarly outcast [James Gordon Bennett] who daily sends forth a dirty sheet in this city under the title of *The Herald*." Bennett could hold his own in that company. He said of Horace Greeley's *Tribune*: "The *Tribune* establishment, from top to bottom, has been recently converted into a socialistic phalanx . . . that has produced on public affairs and the public mind a more deleterious, anti-Christian, and infidel effect . . . than all the publications that have hitherto appeared from the time of Voltaire."

This critical tradition—or polemic, as the case may be—is a relic of the past insofar as newspapers are concerned. The ownership of the American press is now concentrated in a relative handful of large communications conglomerates. Local monopolies have arisen in virtually all of our cities. So there are few competitors left to criticize. Self-criticism is a rarity and, where it exists, is rarely aggressive. Some of the slack has been taken up by the "alternative press," by both local and national magazines, and by various authors and academicians. But the audience for these forms of criticism is limited and, so far as we can tell, so is the impact.

The critical tradition has never existed within the broadcasting industry and has not taken hold despite the ever-growing competitiveness within the broadcasting marketplace. The evening news programs have very sizable local and national audiences that undoubtedly would be receptive to press criticism, for example, or to criticism of local and network news practices. A thorough investigation of the techniques of “60 Minutes” by its competitor, “20-20,” would be made into fascinating television. But broadcasters, out of a sense of vulnerability or for other commercial reasons, do not nurture programming of that nature.

So the burden of broadcasting criticism falls primarily on newspapers and magazines. That is true with respect to literature, films, the recording industry, and other expressions of the popular culture. Much of what is done along these lines may not qualify as true “criticism,” which is often defined as systematic analysis within a framework of certain aesthetic and philosophical principles and standards; academic work, in a word. The book, film, or record review, by way of contrast, is designed, essentially, to introduce an audience to a new work or production. In that sense its critical value may be of less significance than its commercial value as a form of publicity.

In any case, it is newspaper and magazine writers who produce the reviews, the criticism, and the commentary on our popular culture and its various media of communication and art. As you will find in these essays, writers approach these critical tasks not only from abstract aesthetic positions but from political, sociological, ethical, and historical perspectives as well. They promote some value systems and seek to discredit others; they can be preachy on subjects such as ethics, social justice, highbrows, and lowbrows. They may disagree on definitions of obscenity and pornography and the political implications involved.

But in demographic terms, the essayists represented in this volume have much in common in addition to a common employer, *The Washington Post*. We are, without exception and by government definition, members of the upper middle class. Racially, we are overwhelmingly (but not entirely) white. Few of us have had special training or instruction in the arts and crafts of “criticism.” We tend to come out of universities and colleges with degrees in the liberal arts, with interest in politics and popular culture, with general experience as newspaper reporters, and with present assignments that are to one degree or another the result of happenstance rather than design. There is, thus, an accidental and amateurish quality to much of what we do. But it is a quality that can lend freshness, authenticity, and variety to the work.

Editors at *The Post* have for many years encouraged the development of popular and relevant forms of criticism and created in various sections—Style, Book World, and Outlook, among others—forums in which it all fits and from which most of these pieces were taken.

Richard Harwood
Ombudsman
The Washington Post

Publisher's Foreword

The book you hold in your hand is unusual in mass communication education. Most compilations of articles on media are on the scholarly side and, while very useful, are somewhat removed from our daily experience of media. They are glances from afar. We set out to publish something closer to the action.

The mass media today have unprecedented impact on our daily lives. We are bombarded by messages of every sort: informative, entertaining, and, most of all, persuasive. We are daily persuaded to buy something, vote for someone, or think a certain way about a company or an institution or a government. In the face of this saturation, it is easy to become desensitized, to stop thinking clearly or critically about the messages we are asked to process. That is a mistake, particularly for the student of communication, who, like all of us, is a user of media, but who one day may also be one of its creators.

But if the media are the source of so many messages, they also provide the vehicle for understanding them. In this book, you will find 98 articles on the media from the pages of *The Washington Post*, itself one of the most prominent voices of one of the oldest, most prominent mass media. Individually these pieces range from straightforward news stories on media industries and issues, to profiles of media creators, to thoughtful overviews of trends in media today. And that is exactly their value—their focus on the media today. Together, these articles are a cross-sectional look at the mass media and their place in our society over the last few years. They are not scholarly. They are day-to-day dispatches from the front lines.

In organization, *Messages 4: The Washington Post Media Companion* closely parallels the structure of the usual beginning course in mass communication. It is intended to be used as a supplement to a regular textbook, or to an instructor's notes, both of which will provide depth, rigor, and a grounding in history and research. It is our hope that what *Messages 4* will provide is good writing from one of the greatest newspapers of the day. Enjoy.

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The Mass Media 1

Time Warner, TBS Agree on \$7.5 Billion Merger

Deal to Create
World's Largest Media Company

PAUL FARHI

Time Warner Inc. and Ted Turner's Turner Broadcasting System agreed yesterday to join forces in a \$7.5 billion merger, the latest in a string that is transforming ownership and management of the media and entertainment industries.

As the largest media company in the world, Time Warner-Turner would jointly shape images and information that touch virtually every American and a growing portion of the world: news from Cable News Network and Time magazine; movies and TV shows from Warner Bros. and two Turner owned studios; animated cartoons; and the cable systems and cable networks that deliver them.

If completed, the Time Warner-Turner union would be the third huge merger in seven weeks, following Walt Disney Co.'s \$19 billion takeover of Capital Cities/ABC Inc. and Westinghouse Electric Corp.'s \$5.4 billion buyout of CBS Inc. this summer.

The Time Warner and Turner merger is arguably the most complex and far-reaching of all of the summer's deals. It brings not just the two companies into alliance, but involves three other big telecommunications firms that now own chunks of TBS and Time Warner.

These include Tele-Communications Inc. (TCI), Time Warner's only larger rival in the cable business and holder of 21 percent of Turner's stock; US West Corp., a Denver-based regional phone company that has a \$2.5 billion investment in a Time

Warner partnership; and Seagram Co., the new owner of the MCA entertainment conglomerate that also owns almost 15 percent of Time Warner.

Yesterday, the deal already was being challenged. US West filed suit to block it on grounds of breach of contract, while two consumer organizations argued to the Justice Department that it would concentrate an already concentrated industry and raise prices.

"We fear that . . . {the linked ownership} will thwart the development and expansion of widespread communications competition, and will lead to higher cable and telephone prices," the Consumers Union and Consumer Federation of America said in a joint letter to Anne K. Bingaman, the Justice Department's top antitrust attorney.

Time Warner Chairman Gerald M. Levin said yesterday that cable TV rates would not rise "irresponsibly" as a result of the merger, nor would the deal harm the large and growing telecommunications market.

Because of this chain of overlapping ownership, antitrust regulators in Washington are likely to look closely at how this merger affects not only the marketplace but the marketplace of ideas, industry analysts said.

Officials of the Federal Trade Commission and the Justice Department—the two overseers of antitrust law—will meet next week to decide which agency will review the merger.

"We have to ask ourselves not just if it passes muster in an economic antitrust case but if it passes muster in First Amendment terms," said a senior official, who asked to remain anonymous. "It may fall on the safe side of the line in the market, but (the government) might challenge it" if it presents too much control over public opinion and speech.

A Time Warner executive said yesterday his company did not expect major problems from Washington.

Investors appeared to like the deal. Time Warner stock rose 87½ cents to close at \$40.62½. Turner A stock was up 12½ cents to close at \$28.87½, while TCI's was up 12½ cents to close at \$18.75.

Levin and Turner, who would become vice chairman of Time Warner, hailed the companies' agreement in New York yesterday with much the same rhetoric used by executives who crafted the earlier deals. The addition of Turner's programming, they said, would complement Time Warner's existing strengths in production and distribution.

Some analysts questioned that logic. "I'm not anti-merger," said Eli Noam, a Columbia University professor of finance and economics, "but these are basically old-fashioned empire-building deals," driven more by ego than strategic foresight.

"Hollywood is not a factory," he added. "It's a place where reputation, stars, personalities and creativity play important roles. These are things that can't always be controlled."

Turner and Levin appeared relieved, rather than exultant, after weeks of tough negotiations with TCI's powerful chief, John C. Malone, whose company's stake in Turner gave it effective veto power over a deal.