

More Form than Substance: Press Coverage of the WTO Protests in Seattle

by William S. Solomon

The mainstream U.S. news media have been shifting rightward for at least two decades, as their corporate owners enforce tighter ideological conformity. Oliver North and Pat Buchanan, for example, are now regular commentators on television talk shows. And all of the media now refer to people as “consumers,” cogs in a capitalist machine. But still, news is less than half as profitable as entertainment, and media firms are intensifying pressures on their “news properties” for higher profits, which means the pursuit of upscale demographics. Owners are removing journalism’s much-vaunted separation of newsroom practices and business decisions, blurring the line between news and entertainment, and forming partnerships with one another to offer online news services. As William Glaberson said in the *New York Times* in July 1995, “It is now common for publishing executives to press journalists to cooper-

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ate with their newspapers' 'business side,' breaching separations that were said in the past to be essential for journalistic integrity." Thus, in October 1996, the *Wall Street Journal* reported on a personal feud between Rupert Murdoch and Ted Turner: "The combatants quietly concede that they have become far too interdependent to let the fight escalate into global warfare."

The result is increasingly slick, shallow, sensationalist, and upbeat news that lacks any capacity—and avoids any attempt—to engage the public in critical thinking on basic issues. This is especially so with business and economics: Felicity Barringer reported in the *New York Times* in April 1998 that, "[M]ore than 250 Pulitzers in journalism have been awarded since 1978. Business figures prominently in about 10." The news media's role, as exemplified by the *New York Times*, is that of an "organ of reassurance," to use Doug Henwood's phrase. A case in point is the coverage of the protests against the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Seattle, which took place concurrent with the WTO ministerial meetings of November 29 through December 4, 1999. The coverage documents the corporate media's worldview, as they impose on the events and participants what Todd Gitlin, writing in the *Socialist Review* in 1979, called "standardized assumptions."

This essay studies the twenty-two reports and editorials in the *Los Angeles Times* and the thirty-five in the *New York Times*, from November 21 through December 21, 1999. These two papers are arguably the most influential daily newspapers in the United States, and among the largest. The *Wall Street Journal*, which has the second largest circulation in the United States, is not a general circulation newspaper; it aims primarily at financial elites, "middle management . . . startups and Internet-based companies," says Anne Stuart in *CIO Magazine* (December 15, 1999-January 1, 2000). And the jingoistic, tabloid-style *USA Today's* news reports are so brief as not to sustain lengthy scrutiny.

The *Los Angeles Times* is owned by the Times-Mirror Company; the *New York Times*, a family-owned business since the late nineteenth century, announced in mid-March that it will be acquired

by the Tribune Company in the near future. So probusiness coverage is the norm, not because of secret calculations in a top editor's office but for structural reasons. "Every publication is used to further its own interests from time to time," said a lawyer for media baron Rupert Murdoch, quoted in a piece by Elizabeth Jensen and Eben Shapiro in the *Wall Street Journal* in October 1996. Murdoch "does it no more often than anyone else." Ben Bagdikian, in the *Guild Reporter* (April 1982), notes:

The new owning corporations of our media generally insist that they do not interfere in the editorial product. All they do is appoint the publisher, the editor, the business manager and determine the budget.

If I wanted control of public information, that is all I would want. I would not want to decide on every story every day or say "yes" or "no" to every manuscript that came over the transom.

I would rather appoint leaders who understand clearly who hired them and who can fire them, who pays their salaries and decides on their stock options. I would then leave it to them.

The coverage of the Seattle protests in the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* shows a common theme: Only zealots hold radical critiques of the WTO, which actually represents the best hope for the world's future. This theme is developed in many ways. First, radical critiques are attributed solely to marginal figures who hold unconventional, impractical, and possibly unwise views. "Who on earth were they," the *Los Angeles Times* wondered, "and what were they so mad about?" (December 3, p. A1). Such people represent "an array of special-interest groups" (*LAT*, December 3, p. A1), unlike the WTO delegates, who presumably represent virtually all of the world's peoples. Worse, some of the protesters are anarchists: a *New York Times* headline read, "Dark Parallels With Anarchist Outbreaks in Oregon" (December 3, p. A12).

The protesters "warn of a sinister, netherworld economy where children are exploited in Dickensian factories . . . [and] greedy corporations run roughshod over traditional ways of life" (*LAT*, November 28, p. A1). For them, the WTO is "a handmaiden of corporate interests" (*NYT*, December 1, p. A1), "the tyrannical

symbol of a global economy that has shoved social priorities aside in a relentless quest for profits" (*LAT*, December 3, p. A1). The WTO meeting "has drawn" (*LAT*, December 1, p. A1) many delegates, but the protesters "descended" on Seattle (*NYT*, December 1, p. A1), which rather suggests a plague of locusts. Editorials were less subtle: The protesters are "a Noah's ark of flat-earth advocates" (*NYT*, December 1, p. A23). Their "vitriol no doubt plays well with certain audiences. . . . But many average Americans may instantly realize . . . [that] the idea of increasing corporate profits . . . is a goal you share with management" (*LAT*, December 5, p. C1).

Yet the coverage did not simply denigrate the protesters. Quite the contrary, it granted a degree of legitimacy to the many "peaceful" ones, as distinct from a "small knot" (*NYT*, December 1, p. A14) of "more militant elements" who used the police's behavior "as a cue to go on a rampage" (*NYT*, December 2, p. A1). This legitimacy came at a price: It oversimplified the array of views among the protesters. In so doing, it echoed Clinton's stance of siding "with the cause of many of the peaceful demonstrators"—as though they all shared one view—"even as he denounced those who engaged in violence" (*NYT*, December 2, p. A1). Further, it misrepresented the protesters' views: For many, Seattle was a venue for raising a more basic issue than the WTO or the World Bank—a strong critique of capitalism itself. This was abundantly clear to people in the streets of Seattle. Richard Smith, a participant, noted: "The anti-market, anti-corporate feeling, although strong, was still fairly inchoate. But most people . . . definitely were for . . . democratization of the economy. . . . Such demands are of course ultimately anti-capitalist because they can't be realized under capitalist property relations." For the *New York Times*, though, "the basic point the demonstrators sought to make" was "the need to reform the WTO's procedures and values" (editorial, December 2, p. A34).

Such misrepresentations supported the implication that the protesters' criticisms were not so dissimilar to those of many WTO

delegates themselves. From the meeting's start, the WTO's "image . . . was . . . [that] of an institution under siege from within—among warring countries—and from without by unruly protesters" (*LAT*, December 2, p. A1). This scenario lent itself to a parallel theme: If only the protesters would understand "free trade" properly, then they would support the WTO. Quoting delegates to this effect was common: "These people don't understand the benefits of free trade to developing nations," said a German delegate (*NYT*, December 1, p. A14). Estonia's trade ambassador told some protesters, "I'm a socialist. You people are nuts" (*LAT*, December 1, p. A1). Swaziland's delegate said of Seattle: "International trade built this city, but people just don't get it" (*NYT*, December 2, p. A17). And China's chief trade negotiator stated: "Globalization is not a thing that everyone naturally understands" (*NYT*, December 2, p. A17).

Thus, it was the WTO's *failure to explain its case well*, rather than its *policies*, that the papers portrayed as a key cause of the demonstrations. "We need to do a better job in explaining to the general public what we do," said Mexico's trade ambassador (*LAT*, December 18, p. A1). "It's terribly sad to me that we have let people tell so many lies," said a delegate from El Salvador (*NYT*, December 2, p. A17). "Expansion of trade and investment . . . promotes the general welfare," said a former deputy U.S. trade representative. "Why they [critics] don't see that, I don't understand" (*LAT*, November 28, p. A1).

Language is perhaps the most basic indicator of the corporate media's views. Such terms as "free trade" and "liberalization" were not defined; their meaning was assumed to be so clear as to require no explanation. Thus "globalization" is simply a fact of life, rather like gravity; certainly it is not a continuation of colonialism and imperialism. Quite the contrary, the WTO was depicted simply as a means to render the essentially benign process of "globalization" as rational and equitable as possible. To "its most militant critics, globalization amounts to an assault . . . on deep-seated cultural values" and on the environment (*LAT*, November 28, p. A1). But "only recently has anyone dreamed of connecting such assorted griev-

ances to trade policy" (*LAT*, November 28, p. A1). WTO proponents always "said," whereas WTO critics "argued" and "complained." In case this was too subtle, the appropriate perspective was made clear: "Economists regard free trade as just about as controversial as motherhood" (*LAT*, November 28, 1999, p. A1).

The protests themselves elicited the news media's longstanding aversion to social disorder—journalists are, according to Herbert Gans, the author of *Deciding What's News*, "as much concerned with the restoration of order by public officials as with the occurrence of disorder." Seattle "was engulfed in demonstrations that threw the opening of global trade talks into turmoil" (*NYT*, December 1, p. A1). A "daylong spasm of protest . . . paralyzed downtown Seattle . . . plunging parts of the city into chaos;" by day's end, "skirmishes continued between weary police and a remaining group of hardcore protesters" (*LAT*, December 1, p. A1). Thus "violence" was defined solely as social unrest and damage to private property, not as environmental damage and human suffering. Although police and protest groups had discussed the protest plans in advance, the police may have been misled by "extreme dissenters" (*LAT*, December 2, p. A1). Perhaps, the *Los Angeles Times* reported, the Seattle police should have been more proactive in learning the demonstrators' true intentions; in Washington, DC, the paper said, police "even use informants and undercover officers."

Reports on the protests were followed by reports commending delegates who "struggled . . . to salvage" the meeting (*LAT*, December 2, p. A1). Clinton's efforts "collapsed . . . after a rebellion by developing countries and deadlock among America's biggest trading partners" (*NYT*, December 5, p. A1). Just as Hanoi "fell" to the National Liberation Front, so the WTO talks were called the "Collapse in Seattle" (*NYT*, December 6, p. A30). Furthermore, despite the massive demonstrations, the WTO's impasse in Seattle was reported as solely a consequence of internal divisions. Follow-up reports noted the U.S. delegation's contention that "progress" was made, although "other countries reject the U.S. administration's thinking" (*LAT*, December 18, p. A1).

Overall, the *Los Angeles Times* had more thorough coverage of the demonstrations, including the protesters' use of the Internet and of cellular telephones. The protesters "are astonishingly sophisticated in their understanding of the most important issues facing the world's population" (December 6, p. C6). When police chased demonstrators through streets outside downtown, "on-lookers shouted from balconies and rooftops, a chorus of 'Let them go!'" (December 2, p. A1). The best quotation in all of the coverage was that of a young man yelling at police who were handcuffing dozens of demonstrators: "You'll have to arrest the entire population of the world if you want to get us all!" (December 2, p. A1).

The *New York Times* offered a broader context for viewing the protests. One report noted various international views: "In some countries, commentators could barely contain their glee at what they saw as a humiliating blow to American domination of the world trade agenda. . . . Brazil and other Latin American countries view the demonstrators as supporters of their own position—that the international economic order is unfair to developing countries" (December 2, p. A17). More pointed was a report that WTO officials "ducked significant action" on the "veil of secrecy surrounding its proceedings. . . . 'In England, it was called the Star Chamber,'" said a Sierra Club official. Said Ralph Nader: "The first thing a dictator wants is for no one to know what he's doing" (December 4, p. A6). This was as close as either newspaper came to explaining either the WTO's workings or its history. Similarly omitted was the background of WTO Director Mike Moore who, as a member of New Zealand's cabinet, aided in the "massive sell-off of public assets to international big business"—although his administration "had no mandate for privatization" (*Guardian/Observer*, letter to the editor, November 27).

The *New York Times'* and the *Los Angeles Times'* coverage was in sharp contrast to that in Britain's daily *Guardian* and Sunday *Observer*, which ran sixty-seven stories and editorials on the Seattle protests between November 21 and December 21, 1999. Its self-

styled radical voice, made possible by the *Guardian's* Scott Trust, is the "single exception" to Britain's concentration of media ownership and the consequence that "proprietors and their resources set clear parameters within which the creative activity of journalism must be conducted" (as Bob Franklin pointed out in *Newszak and News Media* in 1997). The parameters of the *Los Angeles Times* and the *New York Times* become clearer when their coverage is contrasted to that in the *Guardian/Observer*. Only the latter noted the international nature of the protests. First, the Seattle demonstrators came from various parts of the globe. Second, "simultaneously [with the Seattle talks] . . . nearly 1,200 non-governmental organizations in 87 countries will be calling for wholesale reform of the WTO" (November 25). A regular reader of the *Guardian/Observer* would not have been surprised by the WTO's impasse in Seattle, as there were a number of advance reports to the effect that "divisions between the world's main trading blocs . . . scuppered attempts to determine an agenda for a new round ahead of next week's meeting" (November 24).

In Seattle, the *Guardian/Observer's* staff filed a number of reports on the demonstrators' preparations: "There is a heady whiff in the air of anti-Vietnam protests" (November 30). Both U.S. newspapers estimated the protesters' numbers at thirty thousand; the *Guardian/Observer* said one hundred thousand. Similarly, the latter newspaper was far more willing to criticize the U.S. delegation's behavior: In the hotels, "the U.S. is doing a bit of heavy arm-twisting to get some of the developing countries to sign up to their position, but it seems to have backfired," said a European Union official (December 1). U.S. officials "left it far too late to invite prime ministers and presidents who—once it was clear that the negotiations could become a PR disaster—found that their diaries were too busy to spend a couple of days in Seattle" (December 2). Most amusing was the report of a *Guardian/Observer* correspondent who was mistakenly given a delegate's credentials and thus was able to attend closed-door meetings: Many delegates seemed to doze, and "the only sign of life is a Latin American delegation where the

minister could well be in love with his adviser. . . . In the far distance, one delegate is blowing bubblegum. One by one the developing countries say their bit, but it looks as if the gap is far too wide to be bridged" (December 3).

Only the *Guardian/Observer* reported that "African, Caribbean and Latin American nations" were "furious at heavy-handed attempts by the U.S." to pressure them to agree to a deal. The Organization for African Unity said "that it was prepared to block agreement in protest at the way it was excluded from behind-the-scenes discussions" (December 4). An Indian ecologist said that the WTO "is being rejected around the world as people recognize the face of unacceptable governance and undemocratic law-making" (December 4). The social unrest in Seattle was summed up by New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani: "It indicates the remaining damage that Marxism has done to the thinking of people" (December 4).

When an issue is important to the state and the corporate sector, they shape its coverage in the mainstream U.S. news media. (This point is made more extensively by Bagdikian in *The Media Monopoly* and W. Lance Bennett in his essay on press-state relations in the United States in the *Journal of Communication*, Spring 1990.) For these media, a basic critique—much less a total rejection—of the WTO is simply unthinkable. As exemplified by the *Los Angeles Times* and the *New York Times*, these media tended to trivialize and misrepresent the demonstrators' perspectives, thus devaluing them and rendering them more compatible with corporate values. This coverage is not explicable in terms of the media's use of new technologies (e.g., laptop computers, cellular telephones, and computerized databases). Nor is it explained by journalists' claims to "objectivity," or by scholars' assertions that the news is an idiosyncratic assortment of symbols and tropes. Rather, the mainstream U.S. news media's political economy is a far more reliable guide to their content.