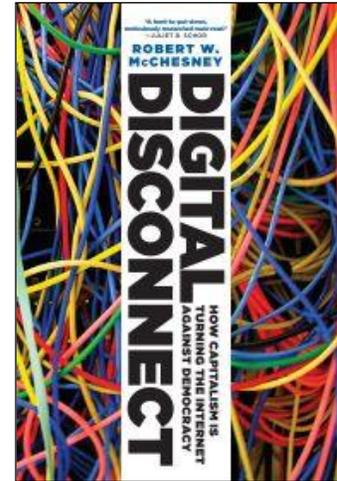


Robert W. McChesney, **Digital Disconnect: How Capitalism is Turning the Internet Against Democracy**, New York, NY: New Press, 2013, 299 pp., \$27.95 (hardcover).

Reviewed by  
Garrett M. Broad  
University of Pennsylvania

Researchers interested in the intersections between media systems, journalism, communications policy and democracy are likely to already be familiar with the work and perspectives of Robert McChesney. For decades, he has published prolifically, highlighted by books that include *Rich Media, Poor Democracy* (2000) and *The Death and Life of American Journalism* (2010, with John Nichols). McChesney has matched this scholarship with activism in the media reform movement, most notably as co-founder of Free Press, today the largest nonprofit media reform organization in the nation. His recent publication, ***Digital Disconnect: How Capitalism is Turning the Internet Against Democracy***, builds upon this rich tradition of scholar-activism, updating it for the digital age.



The masterfully researched and engaging text is a stinging indictment of actually existing capitalism's influence on press freedom and democratic life in the United States. Blending historiography with critical theory, political economy with media studies, *Digital Disconnect* argues that American capitalism has leveraged the Internet to undermine and weaken democracy, just as it did with the communication technologies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet, McChesney argues, there is still some hope—we are in the midst of a critical juncture, and “battles over the Internet are of central importance for all those seeking to build a better society” (p. 232).

*Digital Disconnect* is quite consciously a piece of public scholarship, a book that could benefit readers from diverse scholarly and professional backgrounds. McChesney is right to situate himself among a list of other public intellectuals whose writings serve to “define how Americans—including scholars, concerned citizens, activists, journalists, and policy makers—view the Internet and lay out what many of the relevant issues are” (p. 4). It is a text, then, that could just as easily be assigned to undergraduate students as it could be seen as required reading for advanced scholars, or find a place in the bookshelves of activist-minded citizens.

In Chapter 1, McChesney frames the reader's understanding of the digital age. He outlines two ideal types that he argues characterize scholarly and public opinions on the role of the Internet in contemporary society. First, he suggests that the “celebrants” are the loudest and most publicized Internet observers, those who steadfastly argue that online and digital technologies function to promote global democracy and progressive innovation worldwide. This perspective is countered by the “skeptics,” those naysayers who, “fear deeply that the Internet is re-creating people in technology's image, flattening our intelligence and lessening our creativity” (p. 12). McChesney, however, suggests that both outlooks are fundamentally flawed, since neither grapples with issues of political economy in order to understand

the ways in which “really existing capitalism” constrains the possibilities of democratic life in the Internet age. The manuscript that follows is dedicated to an exploration of this foundational, yet often overlooked, social and technological issue.

Chapter 2 asks the question—does capitalism equal democracy? McChesney offers his version of an American catechism on markets and democracy, the commonly held perspective that, “capitalism is the optimum regulator in most areas of the economy, that the profit system works, and that it is in everyone’s interest to encourage something as close to that system as possible” (p. 24). Showing off his strong command of both empiricism and theoretical inquiry, McChesney skillfully argues that persistent inequality, monopolized markets, manipulative advertising, and a history of governmental intervention prove the catechism bunk within the actually existing capitalism of the United States. He argues that Jefferson, Franklin and Lincoln would be horrified by the rampant depoliticization and hyper-commercialism that characterize today’s corporate capitalist republic. He wonders—can the Internet be the force to promote democracy within this troubled landscape?

Another commonly accepted catechism opens Chapter 3, this time purporting that free markets serve as the foundation for a free press, which then serves as a foundation for healthy democracy. The debunking commences again, this time based in the political economy of communication (PEC) research approach. This perspective has two primary interests: a) to investigate the institutional structures that define media and communication systems, and b) to emphasize the role of government policies in establishing and maintaining media and communication systems. McChesney is in his element as he runs through the history and principles of the American media and journalism industries, concluding that commercial media has unfairly benefited from government policy while journalists have kowtowed to the interests of powerful corporate and elected officials. Again, he asks, can the Internet deliver us from the crisis of corporate media, or will it simply replicate the capitalist mistakes of the past, with disastrous consequences?

McChesney finally turns his full attention to the Internet in Chapter 4, forcefully arguing that its roots as a noncommercial—even anti-commercial—entity have been thoroughly disconnected: “The tremendous promise of the digital revolution has been compromised by capitalist appropriation and development of the Internet” (p. 97). The author’s storytelling ability is highlighted in this chapter, as he takes the reader on a complicated but engaging journey through the wonky world of digital media mergers, FCC policymaking and government investment. While he makes a few nods to the ongoing success of Wikipedia and other noncommercial Internet outlets that carve out necessary spaces for public interest media, these are seen as merely exceptions to the commercialized rule. “The point of government regulation, pure and simple, became to help firms maximize their profits, and that was the new public interest” (p. 107). Chapter 5 continues on a similar tack, connecting the rise of Internet giants like Google, Apple and Facebook to undemocratic, commercial media policy. “Nearly everything about the way the digital giants conduct their operations smacks of antitrust violations,” he writes, arguing that corporate political power has “basically eliminated the threat of public ownership, as well as credible regulation in the public interest” (pp. 142-143).

Chapter 6 focuses on journalism, what the American founders saw as the “the key institution that would keep people informed of what was taking place and give citizens the capacity to resist tyranny and protect their freedoms” (p. 171). McChesney starts with a fairly familiar recounting of the crises in contemporary journalism. From failing economic models to long-standing creative ennui and an absent governmental and corporate watchdog function, he argues that digital technology has mostly exacerbated these intersecting and enduring issues:

Celebrants who think the market will rejuvenate journalism online and produce better results have yet to come to terms with this record and explain why digital commercial news media would be any different or better. Right now it looks a whole lot *worse*. (p. 184, emphasis in original)

McChesney follows with a proposal for substantial public investment in journalism as a public good, one that is necessary for a functioning democracy. Chapter 7 provides some concluding thoughts on capitalism, journalism, the Internet and democracy, offering a set of basic policy reforms that could unleash the power of the Internet for the public good. The author laments that, in the current political economic climate, none of these reforms stand any chance. Instead, at this critical juncture, what is needed are wholesale investigations of actually existing capitalism, as well as a reshaping of society in order to promote community, democracy and long-term sustainability.

McChesney covers an impressive amount of ground in what is ultimately a fairly concise manuscript. His discussion in the latter chapters that details the connections between corporate media, advertising, online surveillance and the military industrial complex is a prime example of his superior analytical and writing ability. Indeed, published months before Edward Snowden’s revelations about the National Security Agency’s surveillance programs were made public, McChesney’s work already had a solid handle on the topic: “Without meaning to be pejorative or alarmist,” he writes,

[I]t is difficult to avoid noting that what is emerging veers toward a classic definition of fascism: the state and large corporations working hand in hand to promote corporate interests, and a state preoccupied with militarism, secrecy, propaganda, and surveillance. (p. 171)

Future editions of the work would certainly benefit from incorporating a study of the Snowden case to further illustrate the author’s solid argument.

In terms of gaps within the text, those readers who are particularly attuned to issues of race and ethnicity will likely be disappointed by this topic’s lack of attention. Indeed, despite an in-depth discussion of the economic inequality that has emerged from within contemporary American capitalism, McChesney does little to recognize the racialized components of this process, such that ethnic minority populations have suffered disproportionately through the nation’s economic morass. Further, in both the book’s historical treatments of the commercial media system, as well as in discussions of the current digital landscape, the topic of minority media ownership or ethnic media production gets barely a mention. In the globally diverse society of the 21<sup>st</sup> century United States, these are topics that deserve a fuller treatment.

Ultimately, McChesney paints a dark portrait of the state of American capitalism and the Internet. For much of the book, his general argumentation tends to fall in line with the perspectives of the gloom-and-doom “skeptics” he introduced in Chapter 1. However, in the final chapters, he distinguishes himself from this lot by emphasizing a host of concrete recommendations for policy reform, as well as visions for broader social transformation. It is through these efforts that McChesney also fulfills his productive duties as a public scholar. Indeed, while critical analysis must play a major role in the public intellectual’s approach, a reliance on critique alone is insufficient. Instead, if one is truly interested in using scholarship to improve society and promote democracy, criticism of the current state of affairs must be matched with actionable proposals and potential solutions for change. The author should be commended for proving himself up to this challenging task.

As McChesney demonstrates, during this critical juncture, it is imperative that scholars and activists are able to make sense of the Internet and its role in broader society. His political economy of communication approach provides a necessary lens through which these issues can be viewed. For its thorough research, its engaging prose, and its theoretical and practical relevance, *Digital Disconnect* should therefore join the list of must-read texts penned by McChesney during his illustrious career.