

JANICE HUME, EDITOR

Book Reviews

Allen, David S. *Democracy, Inc.: The Press and Law in the Corporate Rationalization of the Public Sphere*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2005. 192 pp. \$30.

“Public life is broken,” proclaims David S. Allen, because the media and law have so actively supported—and been captured by—profit-driven corporations. He laments that the corporate, commercial media deny inert citizens the ability to determine what messages mean. A press that “exists” to energize political discourse instead disgorges formulaic, authoritative news stories that treat individuals as passive spectators, and to serve shareholders, the media make a cult of the popular and the entertaining. Bigger is proclaimed more efficient and therefore better, but he knows the corporation, not the individual, is at the center of society. Speech issues become property issues in copyright, media regulation, and public forums, and the public sphere is lost.

From Allen’s perspective, every social movement and every legal and press theory—from Progressivism to sociological jurisprudence to the responsibility theory of the press—contributed to the loss of the public sphere. The government intensifies the loss as it permits ever larger media aggregations that are immune to antitrust. Public journalism seemed a promising counterforce for a decade, but public journalism, he says, failed to energize public life for lack of altruism. Thus, we are stuck in a “rationalized new media environment.”

Allen’s cultural critique is published in

the distinguished Illinois history series edited by Robert McChesney and John Nerone. Like many critical analyses, his critique offers few remedies—and appears to hold little hope—for significantly increasing public discourse so that more active citizens can fight corporate rationalization and determine their own meanings. While society needs to “rethink the values of democracy,” he would not employ legal and social tools to restore the public sphere. “Envisioning an active public is the work of philosophy more than law,” he says.

Allen does urge that shopping malls and other public places be expanded for public discourse; indeed, he all but calls for a return of the town meeting. But he eschews expanding the public fora by employing the resources and organizational techniques of his corporate and legal adversaries. He recognizes that finding new venues for exchanging ideas would “force a reevaluation of how the press is financed and organized,” which he does not undertake. Nor does he advocate specific economic, legal, or social reforms. He cites approvingly—but declines to elaborate—the detailed proposals of legal scholar C. Edwin Baker for extending discourse in a mixed economic and media system created with government aide.

Allen also rejects employing the legal right of association to strengthen citizen

voices because those associations “further fragment society.” He suggests in passing that private newspapers and broadcast outlets might beneficially become public forums, but he avoids examining the constitutional restructuring necessary to justify such a radical proposal. Forswearing legal tools, political organizing, and strategic planning, he relies on philosophy and democratic institutions to persuade commercial media owners to “make decisions that recognize the importance of discourse and find ways to increase discourse.” A Habermasian discourse is apparently the most likely agent to erode the corporate excesses that stifle democratic engagement. A surprising omission in Allen’s book is the internet. Some cultural critics think the interactive broadband offers potential for increasing discourse, but he presumably sees little opportunity in a new technology that he fails to mention.

Corporations certainly determine much of the meaning of life in America, but fortunately there are still channels where thoughtful critiques such as Allen’s can be communicated, and citizens can debate the meanings.

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