

Ted Turner's Media Legend and the Transformation of Corporate Liberalism

Eric Guthey¹

*Research Fellow in the Society of Scholars,
Visiting Assistant Professor of Law, History, and Communication
University of Michigan Business School*

An *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* op-ed piece published the day after the announcement of Time-Warner's proposed acquisition of the Turner Broadcasting System in September 1995 lamented the problems the latest media mega-deal posed for true believers in the legend of Ted Turner. Although Turner would become the largest single shareholder in the largest media giant in the world, conservative columnist Dick Williams feared Turner would lose his much-fabled autonomy and independent owner status. "Say it ain't so," the columnist demanded of Captain Outrageous directly. "Say you aren't selling out and succumbing to the suits at Rockefeller Center." Explained Williams:

The beauty of Turner Broadcasting has been that it wasn't part of the herd. Even Turner Entertainment cooks up its wonders here, in the real United States, far from the face-lifted and liposucked phonies of Hollywood... It's probably true that your empire had to get bigger or die. And you have been handicapped by Time Warner's presence on your board. After they bailed you out, it must have been like going to work with a loan shark's enforcer. But you've always been the type to beat them, not join them [Williams, 1995].

Williams held Turner up as the paragon of the independent and self-determining broadcast and cable entrepreneur, the outspoken everyman who had built a career on bucking the establishment with improbable risks and proving the experts wrong. Unlike the faceless suits at Time-Warner, in Williams' view a collection of rich, Ivy-league sissies who couldn't walk to work, chew tobacco, or high-five a black basketball star even if they tried, Turner was a real man who lived in the "real United States," and he had built "a business that respected everyday folks." As the most important independent

¹ I would like to thank Jon Byrd, Andrew McAlister, and Michael Szalay for their insightful comments on this article. Thanks also to the Center for American Studies at Odense University, Denmark, and the Society of Scholars at the University of Michigan Business School for institutional support. My book-length study of Ted Turner is currently under contract with the University of California Press.

voice in print and broadcast media, Williams reminded Turner, he had proven that he wasn't just lucky, he had created worldwide news and entertainment networks, he had helped tear down the Iron Curtain, and most importantly, he had done it all "in style."

This view of Turner has evolved over the years in legions of newspaper, magazine, and television profiles, five remarkably similar pop/commercial biographies, and a ghost-written autobiography that Turner decided not to publish [Vaughn, 1975, 1978; Williams, 1981; Meyer, 1989; Bibb, 1993; Goldberg and Goldberg, 1995; Turner and Klein, 1987]. In all of these sources, Turner cuts a larger-than-life figure whose business ventures take the form of heroic missions on behalf of his ever expanding market share. The Turner legend received perhaps its most pristine articulation in 1992, when *Time* magazine crowned Turner "Man of the Year" and "Prince of the Global Village." A generation ago, *Time* explained, Marshall McLuhan had declared prematurely that communications technology had created a "borderless world," of "*all-at-once-ness*,"[sic] a "simultaneous happening" in which "'time' has ceased" and "'space' has vanished." But by 1991, McLuhan's dream had come true – thanks to the efforts of fellow visionary Turner, who like McLuhan exhibited "a passionate sense of what is eternal in human nature and also of what is coming but as of yet unseen, just over the horizon." In the preceding year, Turner's Cable News Network had provided live coverage as U.S. forces bombarded Baghdad and as Russian leader Boris Yeltsin defied a military coup from the top of a tank. Ted Turner himself had become a prime mover of such global events, *Time* proposed, because as a result of CNN "momentous things happened precisely *because* they were being seen *as* they happened." No doubt encouraged by the fact that its parent company Time-Warner owned a 21.9% share of Turner Broadcasting at the time, the magazine concluded that Turner deserved the title of "1992 Man of the Year" because he had transformed viewers in 150 countries into "instant witnesses of history" and had proven that "the world can be brought together by telecommunications" [Painton, 1992, pp. 22, 23].

It's tempting to dismiss this kind of media hype, but I propose that historians should take it quite seriously, not only as a repository of hidden clues to Turner's significance, but as a very crucial element of that significance as well. In this paper I raise three points about Ted Turner's media image as a means of explaining how and why I am working on yet another book on Turner.

My first point is methodological – it concerns how we should approach the public image of a figure like Turner, given the disparity I will outline briefly between that image and some of the hard facts of Ted Turner's career. When you look closely, you find that Ted Turner didn't invent air. With respect to every visionary Turner "breakthrough," a whole network of intersecting causal factors comes into play, including historical, economic, and regulatory developments in broadcasting, cable, and satellite technology, other people's ideas, decisions, connections, and skills, and even more slippery cultural shifts beyond any individual's control. This raises the complex historiographical question of how to assign relative causal weight to Turner's own actions on the one hand, and structural determinants on the other.

Next I want to bracket that question, and propose that even if the image of Ted Turner's unfettered agency is in certain respects a fiction, it is still a fiction with agency, rhetorically persuasive because it both reconciles and recasts the classic liberal tension between individual autonomy and the encroachments of collective government, bureaucratic, or corporate organization. Turner's media image does this in new ways that fundamentally redirect the corporate liberal response to this dilemma – especially as it relates to broadcast policy and media regulation – for a new historical moment. That new moment – call it neo-Fordism, post-Fordism, the rise of flexible accumulation, the era of deregulation and globalization – parallels the turn-of-the-century transformation in the fabric of capitalist and corporate organization Martin Sklar and others associate with the rise of corporate liberalism itself, but elevates entrepreneurial principles and market relations as solutions to problems previously resolved by corporate liberal emphases on rationalization, bureaucratization, and regulatory intervention [Streeter, 1996; Sklar, 1988; Lustig, 1982].

I will conclude with some observations about how this heightened emphasis on entrepreneurship and market relations lies at the heart of what has been called the discourse of enterprise. As a symbolic figurehead for the transition towards this kind of cultural discourse, Ted Turner collapses the individual and the corporate in ways that just might point towards a solution to the methodological dilemmas raised by my first point, and perhaps even lead the way to a new kind of business biography altogether.

Media Legend vs. Market Reality

First the methodological question – what to do with the distance between the language that swirls around Ted Turner and the actual facts of his career. According to the legend, Turner is a self-made man because, after his father's suicide in 1963, the 24 year-old college dropout rescued the family's "failing" outdoor advertising business from the jaws of voracious competitors and single-handedly "turned it around" in the face of "overwhelming odds" by dint of his driving will to succeed and innate business acumen. In 1970, Turner risked everything he had worked so hard to achieve when he bought a failing, ragtag Atlanta UHF station and reversed its fortunes by means of a unique counter programming strategy that flew in the face of broadcast industry logic. Thereafter Turner's career becomes a succession of far-sighted risks that take the entire media industry by surprise one after the other – going cable "when cable wasn't cool"; creating the world's first broadcast superstation; mounting CNN; acquiring a major Hollywood film library and spinning off several new successful cable channels; and finally launching himself into the orbit of the really big boys with the Time-Warner deal. *Newsweek* summed up the theme of Turner's career after the launch of CNN by quoting then Chair of the FCC Charles Ferris. "He exemplifies the entrepreneurial spirit that will help shape the new information age," Ferris said of Turner. "He's shaking up the industry" [Waters, 1980, p. 59].

Much like a Hollywood film, the Turner story proceeds according to a linear, character-centered narrative. The causal logic driving the story is always personal and psychological, even Oedipal – we get behind the veil of celebrity to learn what makes Turner tick. In the most perceptive review of the Turner legend to date, Pat Aufderheide summarizes Turner's very public "private" story as follows: Turner's manic-depressive father was demanding and abusive, and the manic-depressive son has been trying to both live up to and stand up to his father ever since. Like the titular character in *Citizen Kane* (one of Turner's favorite movies), his struggle to build an empire is at one and the same time a struggle to exorcise childhood ghosts, but unlike his father and unlike Kane, Ted Turner has successfully avoided both suicide and the lonely exile of Xanadu with the help of lithium and Jane Fonda, instead channeling his messianic energies into his pet project of saving the world [Aufderheide, 1995, p. 36].

The problem with this kind of therapeutic narrative, as Aufderheide points out, is that Turner's personality alone doesn't sufficiently explain the many changes in the media industry that have been attributed to him. I would add that it doesn't even account fully for his own business success. History doesn't work that way. For example, it is simply not the case that the young Ted Turner rescued his late father's failing billboard company from financial ruin. Probate records and other sources show that before Turner's father died, he had constructed an outdoor advertising company worth roughly around \$3.2 million, on debt of about \$1 million (in 1963 dollars) ["Estate of R. Edward Turner, deceased," circa 1963]. The company's combined annual cash flow from operations topped \$1 million, and it came complete with excess amounts of prime downtown real estate that could be sold off to service the debt [Turner Communications Corporation, 1971]. More importantly, federal largesse in the form of the 1954 Tax Code had turned billboards into tax free cash cows – special, accelerated depreciation schedules could be used to shield revenues in such a way that they could be plowed back into expanding operations. Every seven years you could simply sell the company to yourself and jump-start the depreciation clock all over again, which the Turners did [U.S. Tax Court, 1966; Yellon, 1960, p. 957, 972]. "It's an excellent business if it's properly managed," one of Turner's former billboard associates has remarked, "and it's a good business even if its run mediocre. Its just hard to mess up at if you have any kind of business knowledge whatsoever" [Author's interview with Claude Williams, 1993]. So there really was no failing family business for Ted Turner to rescue in the first place, which was why he was able to start spending months at a time out on the sailing circuit shortly after his father's death.

Turner became much more heavily involved in his company after he bought into television in 1970, but he didn't exactly place himself on the brink of financial ruin. Again, depreciation accounting practices fueled the legend. Financial statements indicate that the company posted a loss of \$334,000 that year – largely because the television station lost around \$900,000. But adjustments for depreciation write-offs not requiring actual cash outlay produced a positive cash flow from operations of \$298,000. For tax purposes the company

used accelerated depreciation schedules that gave it \$635,000 of positive cash flow. In 1971, even using the longer depreciation schedules, the company showed a positive cash flow of \$938,000 (on losses of \$639,000 at the television station). By 1972 Channel 17 itself began turning a profit [Turner Communications Corporation, 1971; 1972, p. 1].

This was not necessarily because of Ted Turner's untutored savvy at television programming. He was a fantastic salesman of television time, and he used his billboards to promote the station around the city with typical Turner zeal. But Robert McKinsey, the man who had run the station from its launch in 1967 until Turner bought it, had instituted the exact same strategy of counter programming cheap reruns for which Turner has received so much credit [Author's phone interview with W. Robert McKinsey, 1995; Jones, 1967]. Moreover, no amount of programming genius would have "saved" Channel 17 had it not been for the 1962 All Channel Receiver Act and certain subsequent FCC rulings, which required manufacturers to put UHF dials on their television sets, and later stipulated that those dials click in place the way VHF dials did. Because of these federal interventions, the majority of UHF stations around the country were in the black by 1972 – not because they were all run by heroic risk-takers like Ted Turner, but simply because enough people owned TV sets capable of tuning them in [Gardiner, 1968, p. 29; "Color, Multi-Set and UHF Penetration," 1972/1973].

As for Turner's prescient mixing of UHF and cable, several factors deserve mention. McKinsey and the initial investors in Channel 17 had formed their company in 1964 as a pay TV/cable venture (part of Paramount's Telemeter system). Their idea was to sidestep the formidable barriers to entry into the television business by means of an alternative structure of distribution [McKinsey, 1967, p. 654]. Only after local movie theater and broadcast interests blocked the venture did they decide to open shop, for the time being, as a UHF station. The people who had sold Turner his other station in Charlotte, North Carolina also had seen the value of boosting the reach of a UHF station by means of cable as early as 1966, although their efforts failed too [Author's phone interview with Dr. Harold W. Twisdale, 1995; U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit, 1976]. We are often reminded that Turner's strategy flew in the face of industry conventions, but by 1970 broadcasters themselves owned 32% of all cable systems, and that number continued to climb [Sterling, 1979, p. 303; Thomas, 1972, p. 88]. Finally and most importantly, FCC rules handed down in 1972 required virtually all cable systems within a 300-mile radius of Atlanta to carry Channel 17 [Turner Communications Corporation, 1972, p. 3].

Likewise, Turner's lionization as the "Superman of the Superstation" ignores the fact that the momentum of telecommunications regulation, the shape and direction of which had its roots in business and governmental decisions made before Turner was even born, had made the advent of the superstation all but inevitable by the mid-1970s. Turner was positioned to get there first, for a variety of reasons including his own personality and behavior, but no amount of visionary thinking could have brought the superstation into being without the proper regulatory environment. "Turner rode the wave – he

didn't create it," says Harry Shooshan, who played a prominent role in Superstation politics by virtue of his position as Chief Counsel to the House Communications Subcommittee during this period. "The wave was created by cable, by HBO, by the Open Skies ruling, and by a host of other regulatory changes. But Turner got his surfboard out early and rode it all the way to the shore" [Author's phone interview with Harry Shooshan, 1994].

In my work on Turner so far, I've spent a lot of time looking at that wave, largely as a reaction against all the attention lavished on what a great surfer Turner was. Turner presents the great temptation to join the endless, circular debate over structure versus agency, to choose between the organizational juggernaut and the Marxists lining up on one side and the entrepreneurial enthusiasts digging in their heels on the other, insisting, in the words of Harold Livesay, that "people matter above all else, and they matter in terms of personality" [Livesay, 1989, p. 5]. Of course great man apologists abstract the individual out of all context. But if you posit structure as causal agent you simply replicate the problem by reifying organizational imperatives, or technology, or capital. In the end, the kind of structural debunking I've summarized here leaves you with the self-evident but otherwise useless observation that *someone* would have eventually created a superstation and a CNN even if Ted Turner had never existed.

Media Legend Revisited: The Transformation of Corporate Liberalism

One way around this dilemma is to pay close attention to the legend itself. In the column I quoted at the outset, Dick Williams frames Turner's decision to sell his company to Time-Warner in moral terms. "Ted, you're about to become the problem you've railed about through most of your career," he says. "You're proposing to become vice chairman of Time Warner Inc., the sort of media colossus you profess to fear, the sort of company that produces the filth you once swore to fight." Williams fears the implications of Turner's decision, because, as he puts it, "A dangerous concentration of media power is under way, allowing a handful of companies to swallow the television and radio markets... That great principle of American broadcasting, localism, is soon to give way in nearly every large market to suits who report to vice presidents who report to corporate bean counters" [Williams, 1995].

One gets the sense that what's at stake here is not only Ted Turner's autonomy, but the very principle of autonomous agency itself, and it's at stake because of the encroachment of the giant, faceless corporation, as embodied by Time-Warner. Williams is exhorting the quintessential American entrepreneur-hero not to become just another slouching organization man. The force of his rhetoric depends on the spectre of the perennial threat to liberal democratic society posed by the rise of the corporation. In the words of Allen Kaufman and Lawrence Zacharias, "the preeminent institution of the modern marketplace, the managerial corporation, has regularly incited debates over its benefits for democratic practices, the market, and liberty itself," because "modern corporate society [threatens] to reduce the individual, America's basic element of

constitutional logic, to apparent sociological irrelevance” [Kaufman and Zacharias, 1992, p. 16].

The corporate liberal solution to this problem centered on rationalization, bureaucratization, and the construction of the Fordist regulatory state. It also mobilized a popular faith in the morally beneficent power of technology managed by experts to help individuals realize and exercise their freedom [see for example Noble, 1977]. In his recent book *Selling the Air: A Critique of the Policy of Commercial Broadcasting in the United States*, Thomas Streeter argues that American commercial broadcasting exemplifies these developments, and represents “an institutional enactment of the central corporate liberal hope and operating assumption: that expertise can solve the dilemmas of liberalism in a corporate consumer economy, that it can square principles of individualism, private property and a neutral rule of law with the fact of collective, bureaucratic institutions” [Streeter, 1996, p. xv.]. The history of broadcast regulation bears out Streeter’s point. The Radio Act of 1927 and the Communications Act of 1934 reduced the power struggle over the control of the airwaves to a scientific matter to be resolved by expertise – the FCC would dole out access to the electro-magnetic spectrum – and legitimized the corporate control of the newly rationalized ether by means of the corporate liberal ideals of localism and the public interest. Even though managed by private companies, commercial broadcasting would be a truly democratic system because individual licensees would serve their communities as public trustees, providing programs of local interest and concern and facilitating a broad range of local expression over the airwaves [see for example Horwitz, 1989, p. 157, 189; Douglas, 1987, Chapter 6; LeDuc, 1973, p. 43ff.].

But this system could not even address the two most salient facts of American broadcasting – commercial advertising and networking. The massive economies of scale inherent in networking ensured that the big money in broadcasting would come primarily from national advertising, and this left local licensees with little incentive or power to serve the idiosyncratic needs of their own community in any real sense. Clinging to the hazy ideal of localism, the FCC ended up promoting and protecting a virtual oligopoly of three all powerful national networks. Broadcast policy thus fell prey to the classic paradox of American progressive reform – it sought to create institutions that would return the nation to an idealized, simpler time when there was no need for such institutions, and this paved the way for the growth of even bigger institutions [see for example Rowland, 1982].

This is the historical context in which Ted Turner arrives to work his magic. Appearing before Congress in 1976 to argue for his right to launch the superstation, he declared:

If I cannot do a good enough job to attract the viewers to my station in the free and open marketplace, then I do not deserve those viewers. I do not think that I should, by government regulation, be protected so people will not have anything to

watch but my station, I do not think that is fair [U.S. House of Representatives, 1976, p. 459].

Offering himself as an entrepreneurial alternative to the power-hungry networks, Turner went on:

You have to remember there are three supernetworks who only own four of five stations apiece that are controlling the way this nation thinks and raking off exorbitant profits... They have an absolute, a virtual stranglehold, on what Americans see and think, and I think a lot of times they do not operate in the public good. I came into the independent television station business because I believe there should be more voices heard than the network voices out of New York, and more opportunity for program selection by the American people [U.S. House of Representatives, 1976, p. 459].

Turner was arguing that he should suffer no federally imposed compunction to serve as a trustee of the public good, and that Congress should abolish restrictions to entry in the television industry based on that principle. But he was also arguing that the removal of those restrictions would allow him to be a *better* public trustee by virtue of the morally ameliorative power of free competition, which would supply an ever greater diversity of goods and protect the public's freedom of choice. "We should be thankful that the marketplace is allowing more competition and diversification," Turner said during Senate hearings in 1979 during which he held up the superstation as an example of the benefits of deregulation. "Television is becoming a consumer product. That's the big difference between what the future holds and what the networks want to keep giving us" [U.S. Senate, 1979, p. 2145].

Of course, these arguments didn't spring full grown from Ted Turner's head – they floated thick in the air he had been breathing ever since he bought into the broadcasting industry in 1968. Channel 17's former president Robert McKinsey had seized upon these exact arguments when he went before the Communications Subcommittee himself in the fall of 1967 to lobby for the right to launch a subscription television service. This same rhetoric was also the common currency at the cable conventions Turner had been attending over the past four years or so, and it was the *lingua franca* of the broadcast reform movement, a loose coalition of activist groups that had been working on a variety of fronts to transform the structure of broadcast regulation and challenge the power of the big three networks since the mid-1960s. Even federal regulators had seized upon new technologies and open market rhetoric in order to address the network problem. "Nobody was going to subject Ted Turner to intense scrutiny if he bashed the networks," recalls Harry Shooshan of the Communications Subcommittee. "He was making the arguments we wanted to make" [Author's phone interview with Harry Shooshan, 1994]. But Turner didn't just mouth the arguments, he *embodied* them – his personal success story, his status as a sailing hero, his Southern bravura, his plucky optimism, his cleft chin, his

Rhett Butler mustache, even his fabled womanizing all combined to make him the exactly the right man at the right time. Although the FCC's decision to allow Turner to beam his station's signal nationwide to cable systems via satellite flew in the face of the principle of localism, Turner conveniently spread the veneer of localism over the entire movement to dismantle the regulatory protection of the network broadcasting system.

For this very reason, Thomas Streeter would argue that Turner's rhetoric was nothing new, that despite all the grandstanding it simply brought to the fore the inherent populist, anti-monopoly strain within corporate liberal ideology and advanced the thoroughly American and non-controversial values of competition over and against monopoly. Of cable deregulation in general, Streeter states, "The result was not a radical change in industry structure toward entrepreneurialism but rather a series of incremental adjustments within the existing oligopolistic, center-periphery, advertising-supported system of electronic media" [Streeter, 1996, p. 175]. It's true that on their own, arguments against centralization on behalf of competition don't present a radical challenge to the corporate liberal edifice, and that Turner's efforts, rhetorical and otherwise, didn't amount to a revolution. He has always been essentially a recycler of old network fare, of Hollywood movies, of live news feed throughout a 24-hour period – he is an exploiter of copyrights along new lines of distribution. As the Time-Warner deal amply illustrates, his primary structural impact within the media industry has been to readjust the landscape of center-periphery relations and to allow for a new calibration of the sometimes competing, sometimes complementary forces of expansion and stability at the heart of capitalist enterprise.

But Streeter argues that corporate liberal broadcasting hinged on a faith in rationalization and expertise, and on a particular conception of the public interest. Turner's aw-shucks, little-guy, anybody-can-figure-this-stuff-out mystique sets itself in direct opposition to these first two imperatives, and his open-market rhetoric substantially transforms the third. As Streeter explains, the old notion of the public interest undergirding broadcast regulation had two parts. One stemmed from the Fordist ideal of a smoothly functioning capitalist social system, which, in Streeter's words, combined "a particular vision of the public as a social force in need of harmonious integration into the larger political economy, and the belief that the consumer system would facilitate that integration" [Streeter, 1996, p. 45]. Conceived in the limited terms of higher wages and shorter hours, the public's interest coincided with capital's, because it would grease the wheels of mass consumption. In this sense reliable television service fueled by and fueling more advertising and consumption did indeed serve the public's "needs."

Ted Turner certainly shares this emphasis on the virtues of promoting consumption, and on the crucial role of the media in implementing that vision. In fact, he recasts the issue on a global scale. In a 1989 interview he said he would like to be remembered most for world peace, and explained:

Man needs to make peace both with himself and with the other inhabitants of this planet. It's a matter of survival, No. 1, and No. 2, it's a matter of good business. You can't sell Coca-Cola or movies to somebody who's got no money at all. If we have a system where everybody had some disposable income and has their basic needs met, I think it would be a much more prosperous and peaceful world [Dawson, 1989, p. 52].

But the notion of the public interest in broadcasting also had rested on traditional liberal notions of the citizen's natural right to property and of the nature of citizenship itself – the airwaves belonged to the citizens of the United States, and anyone who wished to exploit them for commercial gain had to operate as a public trustee of that precious national resource. Turner came to stand for the argument that cable and satellite technology had so greatly expanded the market that the notion of the public trusteeship of a limited natural resource simply didn't apply anymore. In effect, this divested the public of its ownership of the airwaves and relegated the public stake in broadcasting purely to that of a consumer. At the same time Turner, the consummate little-guy outsider, would own a portion of the media system vicariously for the newly disenfranchised American people. The power he gained would accrue symbolically to the people, and this along with a heightened emphasis on consumer sovereignty would solve the problem of the corporate control over the media. As a symbolic stand-in for the consumer, then, Turner doesn't legitimize corporate media management in the top-down, paternalistic mode of a Thomas Edison, a David Sarnoff, or a William Paley. No matter how gray-haired Turner gets, he maintains a youthful, rebellious, almost child-like aura of naïveté and acquisitiveness. "Ted Turner represents the rogue pioneer hormone lost somewhere deep within the gentrified, cable-connected, microwavable American soul," *American Film* declared in 1989 in the hyperbolic prose-style most often used to describe Turner. "He is our surrogate venturer into the future, going boldly where no man has had the gall to go before" [Dawson, 1989, p. 36].

So Turner fundamentally alters the corporate liberal solution to the problem of the corporation, supplanting bureaucratic principles with consumer sovereignty, the public trustee concept with the beneficence of market forces, and the promise of paternalistic corporate management with the vicarious virtues of youthful and regenerative entrepreneurship. Rather than challenge corporate control of media, he legitimizes it on new terms. He does so by personifying the corporate in less threatening, anti-bureaucratic ways, and by enacting in his own person the symbolic insertion of entrepreneurial principles of individual agency, innovation, and chaos into the bureaucratic organization itself. "A lot of people expected Mr. Turner would ride off into the sunset after he sold his Turner Broadcasting System Inc. to Time Warner," stated an article in *The Wall Street Journal* in March of 1997. "Instead, he is off on a wild ride through the world's biggest media empire, crashing into top executives' personal fiefdoms, abruptly canceling deals, asking impertinent questions about lavish expenses, and generally giving Time Warner a one-man dose of culture

shock” [Shapiro, 1997]. Viewed in this light, the Time-Warner deal doesn’t contradict Turner’s legacy, as Dick Williams fears. Rather it fulfills his destiny. Turner’s most significant achievement is not the creation of a few new cable channels, nor the innovation of a way to exploit existing broadcast properties over new lines of distribution, because on the basis of those achievements alone his significance has been vastly oversold. He is most important for the hype itself, for the way he has come to serve as a popular icon for the shift towards what we might call corporate neo-liberalism.

Shifting Market Realities and the Cultural Discourse of Enterprise

One more look at the Turner legend can help to locate this shift in more precise historical terms. In a fit of combined great-manism and technological determinism, the *Time* “Man of the Year” piece celebrates the visionary Turner for shrinking time and space to a vanishing point and uniting the world through telecommunications. Again, it’s tempting simply to dismiss such hyperbole, and to construct a much more convincing explanation for these shifts with reference to the cycles of the marketplace. Such an explanation would proceed along the lines laid down by geographer David Harvey: the very notion of the circulation of capital connotes both spatial and temporal movement, and the best way to accrue profit under capitalism is to cause goods to move more and more quickly along ever more expanding lines of distribution. Although durable goods can only move and turn over so quickly, services and ephemeral commodities (such as television images) can be distributed around the world and consumed instantaneously. In other words, the rise of the service economy, and shifts towards more flexible and global strategies of finance, production, distribution, marketing and market differentiation, corporate organization, and labor destabilization all develop in tandem with the need to circulate capital at ever increasing rates in order to accelerate growth and defer the threat of over-accumulation. This ephemerality and volatility in the global circulation of capital contributes directly to the cultural experience of space-time compression *Time* attributes to Ted Turner [Harvey, 1989].

Of course it won’t do to argue that Ted Turner single-handedly caused the shift from Fordism to a new global regime of capitalist organization. Neither will the structuralist conclusion that “capital really did it all” help to explain Ted Turner. But it is fascinating to note that the language *Time* uses to describe Ted Turner and his behavior just as readily describes the behavior of capital and the new paradigms of corporate organization that have been associated with neo-Fordism. Moreover, if we accept the notion that corporate liberalism accompanied the shift from proprietary-competitive capitalism to corporate-administrative capitalism, then it makes sense that another shift in the fabric of capitalist organization would come accompanied by a transformation in corporate values and ideology as well. Critical discussions of this shift go a long way toward pinpointing the significance of Ted Turner’s media image. For example, Harvey has connected the widespread resurgence since 1970 of competitive individualism and entrepreneurial values directly to

transformations in the behavior of capital. "While the roots of this transition are evidently deep and complicated, their consistency with a transition from Fordism to flexible accumulation is reasonably clear even if the direction (if any) of causality is not," he says, because "the more flexible motion of capital emphasizes the new, the fleeting, the ephemeral, the fugitive, and the contingent in modern life, rather than the more solid values implanted under Fordism" [Harvey, 1989, p. 171].

In a similar vein, Paul Du Gay and Graeme Salaman have discussed the insertion of entrepreneurial principles into the firm and managerial attempts to make organizations more "market-driven" and "customer-led" as part and parcel of the neo-Fordist "discourse of enterprise." Such discourse, they argue, diametrically opposes traditional, Chandlerian tenets about the managerial virtues of bureaucratic organization, turning the corporate liberal *modus operandi* on its head. "Thus, in a curious inversion of what was for many years the received wisdom, that the inadequacies of the market should be ameliorated by the bureaucratic method of controlling transactions," they observe, "market coordination is imposed on administrative coordination" [Du Gay and Salaman, 1992, p. 619]. In the wave of "excellence" literature, in the various forms of "total quality management," and in the implementation of just-in-time systems, the authors point out, managers are encouraged to "reimagine" the entire firm as a set of interactions between customers and suppliers, and even workers are pressed to treat each other as customers:

Central to these quality-focused strategies is an explicit emphasis on the customer, and on establishing a close and direct relationship between organization and customer, and between elements of the organization as if these were customer/supplier relations. The value placed on the customer in current programmes of organizational change represents an attempt to recreate within the organization types of relationship which normally occur on the interface of the organization with its customers [Du Gay and Salaman, 1992, p. 618].

Along with Harvey, Du Gay and Salaman also remark that this kind of discourse has spread out from the firm to the point where all social relationships threaten to become relationships between customers and suppliers – hospitals, governments, museums, libraries, schools, even churches, parents, and marriage partners are encouraged to become more "enterprising" and to attend to the needs of their "customers." In this regard enterprise discourse builds on the liberal faith in the market as a sphere of liberty, but pushes that faith to such an extreme that it fundamentally alters the liberal conception of the relationship between the individual and society. "As the language of the market becomes the only valid vocabulary of moral and social calculation," Du Gay and Graeme explain, "civic culture" gradually becomes "consumer culture," with citizens reconceptualized as enterprising "sovereign consumers" [1992, p. 622]. But while enterprise culture elevates consumer sovereignty, it really crowns the entrepreneur king, because empowered con-

sumers are themselves recast as entrepreneurs. "The enterprising customer-consumer is imagined as an empowered human being – the moral centre of the enterprising universe," explain Du Gay and Salaman. "Within the discourse of enterprise customers/consumers are constituted as autonomous, self-regulating and self-actualizing individual actors, seeking to maximize the worth of their existence to themselves through personalized acts of choice in a world of goods and services" [1992, p. 623].

For this new entrepreneurial self, the corporation no longer represents a form of bureaucratic constraint on individual freedom, but rather the sole arena for the exercise of autonomy and the achievement of self-realization. As Du Gay and Salaman put it, "Through the discourse of enterprise, the relations between 'production' and 'consumption', between the 'inside' and 'outside' of the corporation, and crucially between work and non-work based identities, are progressively blurred" [Du Gay and Salaman, 1992, p. 627]. No longer does the unfettered liberal subject come to the market to act out his or her freedom, because in the discourse of enterprise the individual agent cannot exist apart from the market in the first place. The central liberal conflict between individual liberty and societal constraint is resolved by the conflation of the economic, the psychological, and the social.

In *The Invented Self*, a study of the many biographical legends surrounding Thomas Edison, David Nye observes that one of the central functions of biography is to "assure modern people of the solidity of the individual and of the individual's unproblematic relation to an orderly flow of events." By delving into a private life as a modus operandi for explaining public reality, Nye explains, biography reaffirms that the forces of modernization will not divide and disenfranchise the self-determining agent, understood as an integrated and coherent personality across both public and private realms. But in the very process of performing their affirmative function, traditional biographies predicated on personality implicitly perpetuate the public/private split and eventually force us to choose between structure and agency [Nye, 1983, pp. 17, 187].

Ted Turner offers a way around this problem because his behavior is virtually indistinguishable from the behavior of the market itself. Born in 1938, the same year his father formed the Turner Advertising Company, Ted Turner is the Turner Broadcasting System – even now that he has sold the family business, he personifies the disruptive and energizing presence of Turner Broadcasting within Time-Warner. Before the popular press ever knew about Turner's manic-depressive condition, it celebrated his manic/creative impulses alongside his depressive/destructive tendencies in language that also captures the creative destruction at the heart of capitalist innovation. Turner's career has been marked by the increasing mobility and velocity of capital – billboards sought to capture what the Outdoor Advertising Association of America called "Markets in Motion" [Gudis, 1996]; the move into television freed Turner Advertising from its billboard moorings and allowed it to circulate images at exponentially greater speeds; depreciation accounting kept revenues from both billboards and television in constant circulation; globalization allowed ethereal commodities and capital itself to travel even greater distances in the blink of an

eye, accelerating commodification on a worldwide basis. From this perspective Turner's CNN constitutes both an information service and a logical step in the evolution of the efficient capitalist machine, converting the raw material of current events into a commodity to be distributed around the globe instantaneously. CNN's habit of recycling particularly gripping video images even allows it to convert events ranging from the daily tragedy in Sarajevo to the O.J. trial into instant advertising for itself. "Where were you when the bloodshed began?" asks one such promotional spot alongside images of warfare in Iraq, Bosnia, and Chechnya. "...Where will you be when history happens next?"

As an icon of the new enterprise culture, Ted Turner collapses the global and the self-promotional, the social and the individual, the corporate and the personal, and calls for an approach that replaces the organizing principle of personality with an emphasis on capital. That is to say, Turner is such a creature of the market that his biography can also be the biography of the new ways capital has come to behave during a specific historical period. Such a biography would not concern itself with Turner's personality as some sort of interior force that has shaped external reality. It also would have to reject the notion that capital is simply a "thing out there" that determines thoughts, actions or behavior in any mechanistic fashion. Instead it would adhere to Raymond Williams' cultural materialist understanding of capital as dynamic process, human activity, and mode of social organization [Williams, 1977, p. 75-82]. As David Harvey puts it:

Capital is a process and not a thing... Its internalized rules of operation are such as to ensure that it is a dynamic and revolutionary mode of social organization, restlessly and ceaselessly transforming the society within which it is embedded. The process masks and fetishizes, achieves growth through creative destruction, creates new wants and needs, transforms spaces, and speeds up the pace of life [Harvey, 1989, p. 343].

A Turner biography predicated on such a conception of capital would focus primarily on the ways that Turner's activities – along with the endless telling and retelling of the legendary story of those activities over the years – form part of a broader set of human activities that have as their end result the reproduction of the capitalist social order in new ways for a new historical moment. This is not to say that Ted Turner's personality is not important or interesting, but rather that exactly what is important and interesting about his personality is the way that it intersects with and stands for new forms of capitalist and corporate organization and legitimation. In this sense, precisely because of his dynamic and aggressive personality and what it has come to symbolize, Ted Turner provides an opportunity to examine the personification of the corporation and of corporate agency during a watershed period of change, and challenges the biographer and historian to develop a language sufficiently nuanced to talk about the point where agency and structure meet without reifying either side of that divide.

References

- Aufderheide, Pat, Book Review: "Citizen Turner: The Wild Rise of an American Tycoon," *The Nation*, 261 (July 3, 1995), 36-39.
- Author's interview with Claude Williams (Former President of the Georgia Chapter of the Outdoor Advertising Association of America), Athens, GA, July 22, 1993.
- Author's interview with Irwin Mazo (former accountant and board member, Turner Advertising) Savannah, GA, August 25, 1993.
- Author's phone interview with Dr. Harold W. Twisdale (Former President, Charlotte Telecasters Inc.) January, 10, 1995;
- Author's phone interview with Harry Shooshan, December 9, 1994. Shooshan is now a communications consultant with Strategic Policy Research in College Park, Maryland.
- Author's phone interview with W. Robert McKinsey, February 8, 1995.
- Bibb, Porter, *It Ain't As Easy As It Looks: The Amazing Story of Ted Turner* (New York, 1993).
- "Color, Multi-Set, and UHF Penetration by U.S. Markets," *Television Factbook* (1972/73) 97-a.
- Dawson, Greg "Raider of the Last Archives," *American Film* (January/February, 1989) 36.
- Douglas, Susan J., *Inventing American Broadcasting, 1899-1922* (Baltimore, 1987).
- Du Gay, Paul and Graeme Salaman, "The cult/ure of the customer," *Journal of Management Studies* 29/5 (September, 1992), 615-633.
- Gardiner, John, "UHF: Now a Solid Base for Growth," *Television* 25/6 (June, 1968) 29.
- Goldberg, Robert and Gerald Jay Goldberg, *Citizen Turner: The Wild Rise of an American Tycoon* (New York, 1995).
- Gudis, Catherine, "The Strip and the City: Outdoor Advertising and the Post-World War II Cultural Landscape," Conference Paper delivered at the American Studies Association Annual Meeting in Kansas City, Missouri, November 1, 1996.
- Harvey, David, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford, 1989).
- Horwitz, Robert Britt, *The Irony of Regulatory Reform: The Deregulation of American Telecommunications* (New York, 1989).
- Jones, Paul, "Channel 17 Joins Atlanta's TV Scene Today," *Atlanta Constitution* (September 9, 1967), 18.
- Kaufman, Allen and Lawrence Zacharias, "From trust to contract: the legal language of managerial ideology, 1920-1980," *Business History Review*, 66 (1992), 15-53.
- LeDuc, Don R., *Cable Television and the FCC: A Crisis in Media Control* (Philadelphia, 1973).
- Livesay, Harold C., "Entrepreneurial dominance in businesses large and small, past and present" *Business History Review*, 63 (1989), 1-19.
- Lustig, R. Jeffrey, *Corporate Liberalism: The Origins of Modern American Political Theory, 1890-1920* (Berkeley, 1982).
- Meyer, Michael, *The Alexander Complex: The Dreams that Drive Great Businessmen* (New York, 1989).
- Noble, David F., *America By Design: Science, Technology, and the Rise of Corporate Capitalism* (Oxford, 1977).
- Nye, David E., *The Invented Self: An Anti-Biography, From Documents of Thomas A. Edison* (Odense, Denmark, 1983).
- Painton, Priscilla, "CNN's Ted Turner: History as it Happens," *Time*, 139 (January 6, 1992), 22ff.
- Rowland, Willard D. Jr., "The Illusion of Fulfillment: The Broadcast Reform Movement," *Journalism Monographs*, No. 79 (December, 1982), 1-41.
- Shapiro, Eben, "Ted's Way: Brash as Ever, Turner Is Giving Time Warner Dose of Culture Shock," *The Wall Street Journal* (March 4, 1997) A1.
- Sklar, Martin, *The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism, 1890-1916: the Market, the Law, and Politics* (Cambridge, 1988).

- State of South Carolina, County of Beaufort, Office of Judge of Probate, "Estate of R. Edward Turner, deceased." Will Book #10, circa 1963.
- Sterling, Christopher H., "Cable and Pay Television," in Benjamin M. Compaine, ed., *Who Owns the Media? Concentration of Ownership in the Mass Communications Industry* (New York, 1979) 303, 305;
- Streeter, Thomas, *Selling the Air: A Critique of the Policy of Commercial Broadcasting in the United States* (Chicago, 1996).
- Thomas, Diane, "Wire to America: Cox-American Cable System, Number Two and growing, can bring a revolution to the home," *Atlanta Magazine* (October, 1972) 88ff.
- Turner Communications Corporation, internal documents, circa 1971.
- Turner Communications Corporation, *1972 Annual Report*, 1.
- Turner, Ted and Joe Klein, unpublished autobiography of Ted Turner, circa 1987.
- U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit, "Charlotte Telecasters, Inc., and North Carolina Cable, Inc. v. Jefferson-Pilot Corporation," (Case No. 75-2326,; June 9, 1976, Argued; December 10, 1976, Decided.)
- U.S. House of Representatives, 90th Congress, 2nd Session, Subcommittee on Communications and Power of the Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce," Statement of W. Robert McKinsey, President, WJRJ-TV, Atlanta, GA," Hearings on *Subscription Television* (HR 12435), Oct. 16, 1967 (Washington, DC, 1967).
- U.S. House of Representatives, Ninety Fourth Congress, 1st Session, Subcommittee on Communications of the Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce, Hearings on *The Role of Congress in Regulating Cable Television and the Potential for New Technologies in the Communications System; Part 1, Cable Television Regulation Oversight*, July 20, 1976, (Washington, DC, 1977).
- U.S. Senate, 96th Congress, 1st Session, Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, Subcommittee on Communications, Hearings on *Amendments to the Communications Act of 1934*, May 10 - June 7, 1979 (Washington DC, 1979).
- U.S. Tax Court, "Turner Advertising of Kentucky, Inc. v. Commissioner," (Docket No. 6032-64; May 17, 1966)
- Vaughan, Roger, *Ted Turner: The Man Behind the Mouth* (Boston: Sail Books, 1978).
- Vaughan, Roger, *The Grand Gesture: Ted Turner, Mariner, and the America's Cup* (Boston, 1975).
- Waters, Harry F. et al, "Ted Turner's Empire: A Sports King Tackles TV News," *Newsweek* (June 16, 1980) 58-66.
- Williams, Christian, *Lead, Follow, Or Get Out of the Way: The Story of Ted Turner* (New York, 1981).
- Williams, Dick, "Other Voices: Have suits recruited Captain Outrageous?" *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (September 2, 1995) p. A18.
- Williams, Raymond, *Marxism and Literature* (New York, 1977).
- Yellon, Donald, J., "Depreciation Developments in Congress and the Courts," *Taxes: The Tax Magazine* (December, 1960) 957ff.