

Corporatization of Everything Local

Greg Coleridge

The current battle in Ohio and other states to prevent the removal of local control over cable franchising is only one dimension of a growing trend. “Economies of scale,” “efficiencies,” “modernization,” and “savings” are but a few of the magic words used to justify ripping and stripping local authority over basic services that affect people’s lives where they live. The proposed change is always in the direction of centralization into fewer hands, further removed from where people can conveniently (relatively speaking) weigh in to shape, mold, influence, monitor, and evaluate decisions — and closer to a wealthy few and corporate lobbyists who have the resources to be the “deciders” of the new policy.

Ohio Senate Bill (SB) 117 is one current example. It calls for changing the process for negotiating an agreement with a media corporation to supply cable and other information services in a community. As of now, cable agreements are negotiated between the local government (where citizens have a stronger voice) and one or more media corporations. SB 117 would change the process to an agreement between the state government (through a faceless regulatory agency, in this case, the Ohio Department of Commerce) and one or more media corporations to supply cable and other information services to some but not necessarily all communities.

Gone would be the voice of local citizens to influence the process. *Bon voyage* would be the possibilities to produce and air local educational, political and cultural programming. Eliminated would be the chance to empower local citizens, including youth, seniors and other constituencies disproportionately shut out of the corporate press, from having their voices heard.

It should never be forgotten why localities have the power in the first place to demand money, equipment, training, community channels and other services from media corporations. Cable corporations must bury or suspend their cables on public land (called the public “right-of way”) to provide cable services. This is land that we all have equal right to — the commons. Without the ability to use public land, cable corporations couldn’t earn a nickel of profit. Thus, citizen and community demands from cable corporations are requested in exchange for the leasing of public land to bury or suspend private equipment. The same goes for telephone or other media corporations who use the public airwaves. *We the People* through our elected representatives have the right, in fact the responsibility, to ensure that the commons (i.e. airwaves) are available for all.

SB 117 wants to change this. Shifting the power to forge agreements to the state level will increase the influence of media corporations through their lobbying and access to those few regulators/legislators who will be responsible for “protecting the public interest” (and lack of access to those same regulators/legislators by the public). Media corporations will acquire the virtual control over the terms of using public land (i.e. the public right-of way) and public airwaves.

It’s a road to riches -- and road to control — by business corporations.

Different issue – same trend

Roads to Riches is the title of the cover story article in the May 7 Business Week magazine. A description of the article by Emily Thornton reads,

“In the past year, banks and private investment firms have fallen in love with public infrastructure. They’re smitten by the rich cash flows that roads, bridges, airports, parking garages, and shipping ports generate—and the monopolistic advantages that keep those cash flows as steady as a beating heart. Firms are so enamored, in fact, that they’re beginning to consider infrastructure a brand new asset class in itself. With state and local leaders scrambling for cash to solve short-term fiscal problems, the conditions are ripe for an unprecedented burst of buying and selling.”

The selling off of public services and assets is big business around the world. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank have specialized in the art and practice of conditioning loans to underdeveloped nations (called Structural Adjustment Programs, or SAP's) to the selling off of public services and goods -- such as water, transportation, telecommunications, natural resources, and land. This "corporatization" of public services and goods has been very profitable to many multinational and transnational corporations while adding to the impoverishment of indigenous people.

What SAP's are internationally (in the name of accepting loans and paying off debts), "privatization" is in this country. As local communities find it harder to balance their own budgets, due in large part to the flight of capital (which reduces taxes) and the decline of federal funding (wars, occupations and empire maintenance are, after all, expensive), the temptation to sell off public assets increases.

Most cities once had publicly-owned utilities. Most have been sold off. Some still remain. Cleveland still has MuniLight. There are 85 other communities in Ohio with municipal power systems. Fire, police, parks, water, roads, and transportation are still public services in most communities. For more information, see *This is What Democracy Looks Like: Ohio's Democratic/Self-Governing Infrastructure*, <http://www.afsc.net/PDFFiles/DemInfrastructureFeb07.pdf>

The pressure to sell off these services is intense. Many communities are privatizing/corporatizing their trash pickup, while others are selling off their water systems. Public land is routinely sold to corporate developers to gain critical funds.

The decline of municipal ownership brings with it the decline of municipal control. No longer do people have a direct voice in the issue of services, rates, conditions, terms, standards, working conditions, etc. Such issues are shifted to corporate offices or boardrooms. Additionally, no longer may basic information about, say, water quality, be transparent. Once sold off, such information now becomes "private."

Our efforts to be vigilant on behalf of public control and the public's right to decide are as important as ever. Protecting what remains public, let alone widening the space, will only happen if citizens are conscious, aware and engaged.

This is the only Road to Democracy.

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