



**Richard Maxwell, Ph.D. and Toby Miller, Ph.D.**  
Greening the Media

## Our Nation Turns Its Lonely Eyes To ... AT&T?

Why we need to revise how we think about government and business

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What a time it's been for good old AT&T. Second quarter profits were \$3.82 billion, derived from revenues of \$32 billion.<sup>1</sup> This heroic company is always striving to be more: resolutely independent of governmental interference, AT&T embodies the best of Yanqui knowhow. A corporate champion, it weathers risks and welcomes change and innovation; just like the country that bore it. A company that spells "no" with a "k"—if you catch our drift.

"Think again, please," as Kissy Suzuki says to James Bond in *You Only Live Twice*.<sup>2</sup>

More of that in a moment (not martinis, AT&T—shaken rather than stirred).

It's easy in the wake of revelations about the National Security Agency and the Pentagon, not to mention decades of diminished social services and increased social surveillance, to be wary of the United States government. Its awful wars, its deadly technology, and its doctrine of socialism for the rich and capitalism for the poor all provide reasons to be far from cheerful.

The state's presumed Other is business, which we are remorselessly told is better than government because it is necessarily in tune with the popular imagination, thanks to the discipline of the market. Companies know what we want, and give it to us. Otherwise they wouldn't be successful. Right?

Well, leaving to one side the massive implicit and explicit public subsidies that they luxuriate in, from military contracts and farm-bill freeloading to university research and education, corporations also embark on collusion, espionage, and a host of other unpleasant things that have nothing to do with customers' preferences.

The US government estimated that the illegal trade in corporate espionage was worth \$3 billion in 1965, and \$4 billion five years later. By 1973, almost three hundred thousand security guards were employed by corporations, and overall expenditure on the sector was \$4.4 billion. The FBI investigated four hundred cases of industrial espionage in 1994 and eight hundred in 1996, while the American Society for Industrial Security estimated annual losses to US companies from such assaults at US\$100 billion in 1997, up five-fold in two decades. By 2011, the theft of trade secrets and critical technologies was potentially worth as much as \$250 billion a year.<sup>3</sup>

Take our friends at AT&T (yes, we're ex-customers. Want to make something of it?). The company's recent TV commercial features an employee engaged in counter-espionage against Verizon spies.<sup>4</sup> Inventive. But a courageous whistleblower from within AT&T's ranks has told us the reality: that the firm has enabled and participated in covert, illegal surveillance of US residents by the government.<sup>5</sup>

That said, AT&T has not always had a good ride from the state. Even in the face of great deals or simple regulations, it has stumbled, made a fool of itself, and broken the law.

Most notoriously, the company was offered the internet in 1970 and turned it down. The geniuses at this great American firm decided the new invention's packet system was incompatible with its network.<sup>6</sup>

When we say, "turned it down"—turned down whom?

The internet was created by intellectuals working at private and public universities, with Federal government funding. They were looking for a means of decentralizing the nation's communications infrastructure so that in the event of a Soviet attack, no single site or even a group of hubs that was destroyed would jeopardize the government sharing information.

Being good Americans, having developed the internet, they decided that the best way of disseminating this extraordinary invention was through corporate channels.

But AT&T knew better and declined the offer. The internet remained a collegiate (and collegial) phenomenon for two decades. Agonizingly slowly, capitalism ultimately caught up with universities and governments once the ideas and the investment had come from those inspired and sponsored by public service.

And what has AT&T done with this great boon since?

Let's inspect the record from—why not?—just the last two months, when this towering firm has basked in the profits enumerated earlier.

In October, AT&T was busy settling with the Federal Communications Commission, agreeing to pay \$105 million in reparations to customers because of unauthorized subscriptions and premium text-messaging services.<sup>7</sup>

In November, the great corporate innovator was required to pay the state of California close to \$52 million because of environmental violations—the fruits of almost a decade merrily spent in the illegal disposal of electronic waste. No fewer than 235 AT&T facilities across the state had dispatched to landfills everything from batteries to aerosols in a lawless quest for profit.<sup>8</sup>

And in December, the National Association of African American Owned Media Firms filed a \$10 billion lawsuit against AT&T and numerous subsidiaries, including DirecTV, for allegedly contravening the Civil Rights Act by paying black cable stations negligible amounts.<sup>9</sup>

So the record is ambivalent. If you go by corporate power, AT&T is a grand success. If you go by intelligence, it passed up the greatest gift in the history of the US economy. And if you go by ties to government, there is a mixture of collusive and non-collusive illegality.

As both citizens and consumers, we need a new mindset about such champions of industry. We should rethink the assumption that they are efficient, effective, or ethical. We must demand that the state serve our democratic interests in controlling and overhauling them. In this case, that means refusing to indulge in spying via AT&T (amongst others) and doing more to inspect and seek reparation for the firm's environmental and human-rights record. Now that would see the state responding to the needs of citizens and consumers alike.

## NOTES

1. <http://online.wsj.com/articles/at-t-reports-profit-decline-1406147443>
2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EDuLLOznXE>
3. [http://www.cultureunbound.ep.liu.se/v2/cu10v2-complete\\_volume.pdf](http://www.cultureunbound.ep.liu.se/v2/cu10v2-complete_volume.pdf);  
[https://foundation.asisonline.org/FoundationResearch/Research/Current-Research-Projects/Documents/UOPX-ASIS\\_Security%20report\\_WEB.pdf](https://foundation.asisonline.org/FoundationResearch/Research/Current-Research-Projects/Documents/UOPX-ASIS_Security%20report_WEB.pdf); <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/ba6c82c0-2e44-11e0-8733-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3L3c0t2ZW>

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5. [https://www.eff.org/files/filenode/att/presskit/ATT\\_onepager.pdf](https://www.eff.org/files/filenode/att/presskit/ATT_onepager.pdf)
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8. <http://www.environmentalleader.com/2014/11/24/att-to-pay-almost-52m-for-environmental-violations-cleanup/>

<http://www.naaaom.com/>



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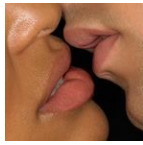
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