

## Social engineering, progressive media, and William Benton

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### **Abstract**

*In the recent past, the start-up costs for launching new media ventures have often been prohibitively high. While these costs have come down with some technological advances, creating an attractive, professional-looking media product is still not cheap. Thus, major liberal ('progressive') philanthropists play an important role in providing new media groups with initial start-up costs, while also helping to sustain the operations of many progressive media outlets over the course of many years, and also providing vital funding for upgrading or expanding numerous outlets and activities. This funding is not without its problems, and in the past few years, the number of critical scholars and activists writing about the arguably antidemocratic practices of liberal foundations has grown rapidly, and there is now a blossoming literature exposing the manipulative funding strategies of these highly influential philanthropists. Yet while few would dispute the importance of money to progressive social movements and their associated media outlets, it is interesting to note that very few academics have given this subject serious thought. Therefore, this paper introduces the work of the Benton Foundation, a relatively small liberal foundation that has played an important agenda-setting role for liberal foundations supporting progressive media groups (particularly since the early 1980s). In an attempt to understand the contemporary role of this Foundation, this article provides a detailed examination of the life and work of its founder, William Benton.*

### **Introduction**

[W]e should be thinking about why... [progressive] publications so often fail. Some of it is, perhaps, in the cards. It's hard to sustain financially, there's not advertisement revenue, or maybe there's not enough subscriptions, whatever. But I think a lot of the publications that start, start from the wrong position in that they don't have a well thought out, I hate to use the term, 'business plan,' but that's the term. (Jensen cited in Nall, 2007)

Having a regular revenue stream is a major priority for any media outlet, yet progressive media outlets (sometimes referred to as alternative or autonomous media)

in particular, have always faced advertising-related problems owing to their adversarial relationship to the capitalist status quo. These progressive groups have, like their mainstream counterparts, been influenced by recent advances in telecommunications technologies, most notably the internet. On the one hand, the internet has allowed progressive organisations to potentially reach a greater number of citizens with little or no increase in operating costs; while on the other hand, they still suffer from the same age-old funding worries that have always haunted progressive groups embedded within capitalist societies.

In the recent past, start-up costs for launching new media ventures have often been prohibitively high. While these costs have come down with some technological advances, creating an attractive, professional-looking media product for television, radio, print, and even the internet, is still not cheap. Thus major liberal philanthropists play an important role in providing new media groups with initial start-up costs to safely set them on their way to potential self-sufficiency. Likewise, such liberal funders also help sustain the operations of many progressive media outlets over the course of many years, while also providing vital funding for upgrading or expanding numerous outlets and activities. To state the obvious, money matters; and to a large extent it determines which groups are created and which survive.

Although few would dispute the importance of money to progressive social movements and their associated media outlets, very few academics have given this subject serious thought. So, while it is widely acknowledged that conservative financiers have succeeded in driving the ideological orientation of mainstream media outlets rightwards over the past few decades, hardly any attention has been paid to the influence of liberal funders on the evolution of progressive media outlets. Yet despite this glaring omission, there is a growing literature that suggests that liberal funders have had a decidedly detrimental influence on the processes of social change (Arnove, 1980; Arnove & Pinede, 2007; Barker, 2008a; Faber & McCarthy, 2005; Roelofs, 2003).

A useful theoretical framework for understanding the corrosive influence of liberal foundations on democracy is Gramsci's (1971) work on hegemony, which demonstrates how elites assert their cultural domination over the masses through the use of consensual rather than coercive institutional arrangements. Although Gramsci's

pioneering work is of “central importance” to radical mass media criticism (Theobald, 2006, p. 26), one vital but overlooked organ of hegemony that Gramsci did not theorise about was philanthropic foundations, whose rising influence on the contours of civil society only became visible some decades after his death. The hegemonic influence of foundations is, however, arguably even greater than other hegemonic elements, like the mass media, precisely because their influence has been downplayed or ignored by academia.

To date only a handful of media scholars have critically examined the impact of liberal philanthropy on the development of progressive media (Balas, 2003; Buxton, 2003; Simpson, 1994). For example, Barker (2008b) provided the first critical review of the involvement of liberal philanthropists, who worked closely with the CIA, in supporting media developments in America. However, this work focused predominantly on the effect of liberal philanthropy from the 1930s through to the 1970s on mass communications research. Therefore, this paper introduces the work of the Benton Foundation, a relatively small liberal foundation that has played an important agenda-setting role for liberal foundations supporting progressive media groups (particularly since the early 1980s, see Barker, Submitted). Consequently, this article provides a detailed examination of the life and work of the Benton Foundations founder, the late William Benton (1900-1973), in an attempt to determine whether the legacy he left behind, in the form of the Benton Foundation, is working to promote a media landscape that bolsters democracy or plutocracy.

The media-related philanthropic activities of the Benton Foundation have historically been very important, and as will become apparent in the latter stages of this article, this foundation has in the past, and continues to play, a key role in catalysing media reform endeavours in the United States. Moreover, the foundation’s founder, William Benton, is an individual whose life is intimately entwined with the leading lights of liberal philanthropy, and integral members of America’s corporate and political elites. Indeed, not only did he found a successful advertising agency called Benton & Bowles (in 1929), but he went on to become the vice-president of Chicago University, served as Assistant Secretary of State (where amongst other thing he strengthened Voice of America), helped fund the work of the famous Hutchins Commission (which

examined the state of media freedom in the United States), and went on to be the United States Ambassador to UNESCO.

### *Alternative Media in the United States*

There is a long history of progressive media outlets operating with varying degrees of effectiveness within American society (Kessler, 1984), but these outlets went through something of a renaissance during the tumultuous 1960s and early 1970s (Armstrong, 1981). The reinvigoration of the alternative press during this period fulfilled a crucial role during this important historical period, by helping inform and sustain the activities of radical activists intent on challenging the legitimacy of elite, imperialistic democracies worldwide. Many of these media outlets – mostly print and radio – were of course dependent on advertising, and this dependency arguably helped to de-radicalise many sources of alternative media. In addition, many progressive media outlets were targeted for destruction and disruption by the US Government’s secretive and illegal Counter-Intelligence Program – also as known as COINTELPRO (Churchill & Van der Wall, 2001). In spite of this, during this time of intense repression, some media products like the Black Panthers’ weekly newspaper *The Black Panther* became immensely popular, with a peak circulation of 100,000 (Armstrong, 1981, p. 146). Yet despite such high circulations, that no doubt would have provided some insulation from advertising pressures, even the Black Panthers’ paper eventually collapsed, in large part because the government simply decided to physically liquidate, or imprison, many of the Black Panthers leaders (Churchill & Vander Wall, 2001; Rips, 1981).

Coinciding with the effective destruction of the Black Panthers, conservative and liberal philanthropists, along with political and business elites, decided that, owing to an “excess of democracy”, steps must be taken to reduce popular interest in democratic matters (Crozier, Huntington, & Watanuki, 1975, p. 134). From the 1970s onwards, conservatives then worked industriously to “take the risk out of democracy” (Carey, 1995, p. 1) through refining the dissemination of corporate propaganda through a vast ever-expanding and well-funded network of academics, conservative think-tanks, corporate front groups, and media outlets (Beder, 2006; Covington, 2005). Ironically, this was a strategy that was in large part based on the mimicry of liberal philanthropists’ funding strategies (Dezalay & Garth, 2002, pp. 127, 276). On

the other hand, in opposition to their much-lauded progressive credentials, liberal philanthropic foundations – who with no irony also funded the elite planning group that diagnosed the crisis/excess of democracy – continued to work to bolster capitalist hegemony (Arnove, 1980; Roelofs, 2003). Liberal philanthropy, exemplified by what used to be known as the big three foundations – the Carnegie, Ford, and Rockefeller Foundations – is of course the primary subject of this paper.

Writing within INCITE!'s (2007) edited book *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*, Smith (2007) observes: “From their inception, [liberal] foundations focused on research and dissemination of information designed ostensibly to ameliorate social issues in a manner, however, that did not challenge capitalism” (p. 4). Despite the monumental importance of this funding issue to progressive activists and media outlets worldwide, judging by the number of articles dealing with it in the alternative media, little importance has been attached to discussing it and investigating means of cultivating funding sources that are geared towards challenging the capitalist status quo. Thus by introducing the philanthropic work and life of William Benton, and introducing the work of his liberal foundation, it is hoped that more writers and activists will begin to focus on this much neglected issue.

### ***Introducing the Benton Foundation***

The William Benton Foundation was incorporated as a 501(c)(3) private foundation in 1948, and after some restructuring it changed its name in 1981 to the Benton Foundation. The Foundation is the legacy of William Benton (1900-1973), and its website ([www.benton.org](http://www.benton.org)) notes that Benton's “lifetime preoccupation was how to apply his understanding of, and belief in, what he termed ‘the high significance of the media of communications’ to education and citizenship.” Moreover the website goes on to point out how he “pushed the envelope... within the foundation world, urging them to take communications seriously and to use it to build democracy.”

The Benton Foundation currently has an endowment of approximately US\$10 million, and its website adds that they receive additional funds from a number of foundations and corporations. The Foundation's stated mission is to “articulate a public interest vision for the digital age and to demonstrate the value of communications for solving

social problems.” Current foundation priorities include: “promoting a vision and policy alternatives for the digital age in which the benefit to the public is paramount; raising awareness among funders and nonprofits on their stake in critical policy issues; enabling communities and nonprofits to produce diverse and locally responsive media content.” The Benton Foundation was, and still is, a key funder of progressive media ventures in the United States (Barker, Submitted): therefore, given the total lack of critical reports regarding the work of the Benton Foundation, the following section will reflect critically on the history of this foundation’s founder, William Benton.

### ***William Benton: The Corporate/Rockefeller Media Guru***

William Benton’s keen interest in supporting media projects was evident well before his creation of the Foundation in 1948, as in 1943, in close coordination with Chicago University, he purchased the influential *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. This purchase, however, did not come out of the blue, because as early as November 1941 Benton had learned that two important meetings had been held whereby a “distinguished group of scholars had joined David H. Stevens, vice-president of the Rockefeller Foundation, to ‘consider the desirability and practicability of preparing a new edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*’” (Hyman, 1969, p. 245). This Rockefeller connection is of course important, given the important role they played in honing the means to manufacture consent for elite interests in the 1939 Rockefeller Communications Seminar (Barker, 2008b; Herman and Chomsky, 1988), and in engineering consent via their work at the Council on Foreign Relations (Parmar, 2002).

As the new owner of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Benton recruited Robert M. Hutchins to chair its editorial board (for details of other editors, see Hyman, 1969: 261-2), and to serve on its board of directors (a position he held until 1974). Other notable members of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* nine-person-strong board of directors included Henry Luce, Jr. and Paul Hoffman - for more on these two individuals, see later (Hyman, 1969: 260). At the time Benton was well acquainted with Hutchins’ work, as Benton had served as a part-time vice president at Chicago University (1937-45) while Hutchins was president of the university (1930-51). Hutchins, however,

hardly had progressive media credentials, because according to McChesney (1999) he had been “[p]erhaps the most important member” of the National Advisory Council on Radio in Education – a group that was formed in 1930 by John D. Rockefeller, Jr. and the Carnegie Corporation to “undercut the sentiment for broadcast reform in the [progressive] educational community” (McChesney, 1999: 207, 209; also see Barker, 2008b).

Benton’s ties to corporate media ‘reformers’ are unsurprising, given that in 1929 he founded a successful advertising agency with Chester Bowles, called Benton & Bowles. In less than seven years Benton & Bowles became “one of the most prosperous [agencies] in the advertising world” (Hyman, 1969, p. 3). Bowles went on to become a director of the Ford Foundation’s Fund for the Republic from 1954 to 1958. In 1937, Benton was friends with William Paley, the head of the Columbia Broadcasting System; furthermore, Benton’s elite media ties were enhanced by his studies at Yale University, where, although Benton “had come to know only a few members of the class ahead of him”, critically “[o]ne of these was Henry Luce, Jr.” (Hyman, 1969, p. 197, 218). Consequently, Hyman (1969) adds:

A number of Benton's friends were key figures in the growing Luce publishing empire: Russell ('Mitch') Davenport, a Yale friend; Tom Matthews, Benton's roommate at Shattuck, who had become managing editor of *Time*; and Roy Larsen, a neighbor at Southport. There was also Ralph Ingersoll, former managing editor of the *New Yorker* whose star was now rising in the Luce organization. In the summer of 1936 when *Life* magazine was in the final months of gestation, Benton had been among the first outsiders to whom Luce and Ingersoll showed the dummies of the format. (Hyman, 1969, pp. 218-219)

Between 1937 and 1945, while working as the vice-president of Chicago University, Benton brought his advertising skills to bear on the university, noting:

One way to develop a business is to find out what the public wants, then to deliver that product. Another way to develop a business is to start with your own idea of a product, often far in advance of what the public thinks it wants, then go out and sell the public that it should want your product or service. Often this is the harder way. But often it leads to the development of the most profitable business. The second way... must be the way of any university that would be great. (Benton cited in Hyman, 1969, p. 175)

Thus Benton’s views meshed neatly with the views of the power elites (Mills, 1956) working with the Rockefeller Foundation to act as *the hidden persuaders* of American

polyarchy (Packard, 1962). Benton's part-time appointment at Chicago University also "marked the onset of a fruitful friendship" between himself and Nelson Rockefeller (for a critical history of Nelson's life, see Colby and Dennett, 1995), and enabled him to develop solid contacts with the other Rockefellers (Hyman, 1969, p. 190).

Following on the heels of his sought-after appointment at Chicago University, in 1945 Benton's interest in the media's role in democratic governance was further 'developed' when he served for two years as Assistant Secretary of State (1945-7), where amongst other things, Benton helped transform Voice of America into a "hardhitting propaganda agency" (Krugler, 2000, p. 7). Then in 1947 Benton's *Encyclopaedia Britannica* provided financial support to his friend, Hutchins, who headed the famous Hutchins Commission, whose "report, *A Free and Responsible Press*, provides the most influential modern American account of the goals of journalistic performance" (Baker, 2002, p. 154). Significantly, the idea for the Hutchins commission was suggested by Benton's long-time friend Henry R. Luce—the publisher of *Time*, *Life* and *Fortune*, and later a key player in the CIA's propaganda mill (see Baughman, 2001; Herzstein, 2005)—which he then sponsored to the sum of \$200,000 (Innis, 1949, p. 265).

Given the key leadership role assumed by Hutchins in undermining progressive media reform efforts in the early 1930s, and Benton's much lauded government propaganda achievements, it is fitting that Baker (2002) observed that the elitist assumptions internalised within the Hutchins Report suggested that "[w]ith adequate professionalism and dedication, a monopolistic media enterprise" could meet all of societies democratic needs, "[e]choing declarations commonly made by owners of modern monopoly newspapers" (pp. 155-156).

The earliest critique of the (Benton-Luce) Hutchins Report was made by Canadian media scholar Harold Innis (1949), which was neatly surmised by Buxton (2004), who wrote that: "Innis was of the view that the domination of the press and of the written tradition in the United States had made serious reflection about the current state of communications virtually impossible." McChesney (1999) also notes how Hutchins "adopted an elitist stance, and worked only to reserve a niche for intellectuals and dissidents on the margins" (p. 223). This pessimistic reformist view



of the options for pursuing progressive social change helps explain why Hutchins was able to maintain such intimate links to the establishment (or power elite), which included America's leading liberal foundations (that is the Carnegie, Rockefeller and Ford Foundations' – the 'big three' of the foundation world).

Hutchins' elitist pragmatism was rewarded in 1951 when he became the associate director of the newly expanded Ford Foundation (a position he held until 1954), and his influence there was integral to the creation in 1952 of the Foundation's independent offshoot, the Fund for the Republic, at which he served as president from 1954 until his death in 1977 (Nielsen, 1972, p. 81). In addition, while at the Ford Foundation, Hutchins worked closely with their president Paul Hoffman (who happened to be a fellow *Encyclopaedia Britannica* director, and a former trustee of Chicago University) in an alliance that was deemed by Raynor (1999) to be "most responsible for creating FAE [Fund for the Advancement of Education] as an independent organization" (p. 197) (for more on this group, see Barker, Forthcoming). It is interesting to note that Hutchins' integral role at the Ford Foundation led him to defend liberal foundations from the Government's 1953 Reece Committee (see Hutchins, 1956), which attacked the Foundation's social engineering from an anti-communist perspective – missing the point that the Foundation's work was geared towards stabilising the status quo, not subverting it.

Given *the higher circles* (Domhoff, 1971) that William Benton floated within, it is fitting that Benton, like Hutchins, also had strong connections to the Ford Foundation. Thus, in 1942, Benton was a founding member of the Committee for Economic Development – a corporate think tank whose creation was led by Paul Hoffman, who went on to serve as the Ford Foundation's first president in 1951, and a director of Henry Luce's *Time* (Luce aides: "no drastic changes", *New York Times*, March 6, 1967). Hyman (1969, p. 231) recalls that Hoffman – who at the time was a university trustee and president of the Studebaker Corporation – had first made a big impression on Benton in 1940 after a meeting at the Chicago University. Hoffman talked to Benton and Hutchins about the need to resolve the "unsolved question of how to achieve high levels of employment and production under normal conditions", which Hoffman said could be best addressed if the knowledge of university scholars and businessmen "be merged". Benton apparently immediately started work on dealing

with Hoffman's proposal, and "[i]n working out the details, Benton turned for help to a University of Chicago faculty member [Harold Lasswell] who had become an after-hours companion" and had been an integral member of the Rockefeller seminar (Hyman, 1969, p. 232). Initially, this elite policy planning group was to be known as the American Policy Commission, and it was going to be made up of around 20 businessmen, of which "[m]ost were personal friends of Benton and Hoffman", e.g. Beardsley Ruml and Henry Luce (Hyman, 1969, p. 234). However, after 18 months of hard work Benton and Hoffman decided that the "bombs which fell on Pearl Harbor [December 1941] had also killed the plan for the commission" as their planned members would be too busy organising the country's war efforts (Hyman, 1969, p. 249). By 1942, however, the planned Commission had a new breath of life and was transformed into the Committee for Economic Development, and Ralph Flanders, a Republican banker from Boston, became the Committee's first chair. It is noteworthy that during his time running the Commission, Benton, was "one of three official consultants to Nelson Rockefeller, the newly appointed Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs" (the others were Robert G. Caldwell and Henry Luce) (Hyman, 1969, p. 234). (Rockefeller's appointment had been "recommended to President Roosevelt by Mrs. Anna Rosenberg (now Mrs. Paul Hoffman)" (Hyman, 1969, p. 235).)

Benton and company's Ford Foundation connections become more significant when it is known that during this same period of time, the work of the three most influential liberal foundations – that is, Carnegie, Ford, and Rockefeller – were intimately entwined with the activities of US foreign policy elites and the CIA (Barker, 2008 b; Berman, 1983; Saunders, 1999). Thus, it is fitting that the William Benton Foundation also served as a useful CIA pass throughout the 1960s (Teodori, 1969, p. 339). Moreover, it is worth pointing out that the Ford Foundation's Fund for the Republic, which was created to fight for democratic freedoms and understand and combat the influence of McCarthyism, shared the same objections to the McCarthyism of the 1950s as the Congress for Cultural Freedom (see Saunders, 1999), which was supported by both the Ford Foundation and the CIA. Indeed the Congress' American committee sponsored Rorty and Decker's (1954) book *McCarthy and the Communists*, "which showed how crudely the Senator combated Communism and how much harm he was doing to American life" (Coleman, 1989, p. 165). Furthermore, as the

Democratic Senator for Connecticut, Benton played a key role in ending McCarthy's reign of terror, as did his Republican friend Senator Ralph Flanders of Vermont (Hyman, 1969, pp. 467-468, 486).

Finally, it is interesting to observe that Benton's close ties to Hutchins and his innovative 'democratic' work meant that in 1960 "Benton would underwrite a project which would bring together eminent scholars from all over the world to consider the revised and expanded aims of the Britannica as it entered its third century" (Hyman, 1969, p. 578). With the Britannica's bicentennial coming up in 1968, Hutchins "had long advocated a complete revision of the Britannica", and based at the newly formed Santa Barbara Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, Hutchins' received around \$425,000 a year for two years to work on this project (Kelly, 1981, p. 190). An important project in its own right, the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions was created by Hutchins in 1959 (in Santa Barbara) with the aid of the Fund for the Republic. (For further details on this Center's work see Barker, Forthcoming; ironically, Kelly (1981) notes that in 1959 the conservative John Birch Society "had a thriving chapter in Santa Barbara" (p. 178) – this is significant because this society is one of the most determined critics of liberal philanthropy.) In 1959 Kelly (1981) noted that Benton "was interested in the possible establishment of a commission on the mass media" and had provided the Fund for the Republic with \$8,250 via his Foundation; Benton then provided Hutchins with another \$25,000, which enabled Hutchins to appoint Fund board member, Harry Ashmore, as a "special consultant to the Center with Benton's grant"; Ashmore then "spent much of his time during his first year [at the Center] on the mass media project" (Kelly, 1981, p. 179).

### ***The Benton Foundation: Media Saviour or Social Engineer?***

Renamed the Benton Foundation in 1981, the Foundation is now recognised as a leading sponsor of non-profit progressive media projects. During a recent interview, William Benton's son, Charles Benton, who now chairs the Foundation, explained how funding of communication projects was not on the philanthropic agenda at all in 1981, therefore "we decided to... try to beat the drum and raise the cry about the importance of communications to both foundations and their grantees" (Kelly, 2004). Throughout the 1980s the Benton Foundation granted around \$0.5 million a year in grants, but its annual budget has now grown significantly and they give away about

\$7 million a year (of which only around 15 percent comes from their endowment). Given the important role served by the Benton Foundation in supporting progressive media projects, and its founder's long history of involvement with elites intent on manufacturing consent (Herman and Chomsky, 1988), it is wise to briefly examine Charles Benton's own similarly elitist background.

Charles Benton's name is linked to numerous progressive groups (e.g. Public Media, The Media Institute, and *The Real News*), which should be expected seeing that he is a liberal (not conservative) philanthropist, but here the paper will simply focus on one of his less than democratic connections. Thus Charles is presently a trustee of The American Assembly – a group which describes itself as a “national, non-partisan public affairs forum” founded by Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1950, and affiliated with Columbia University. Three especially noteworthy fellow Assembly trustees include Stephen Stamas (who is president of the American Ditchley Foundation, and formerly served as the vice president-public affairs for Exxon Corporation), retired U.S. Navy Admiral Bobby Ray Inman (who is the former deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency), and David Gergen (who is a member of the elite planning group, the Trilateral Commission (see Sklar, 1980), and is the chair of the national selection committee for the Ford Foundation's programme on Innovations in American Government). In communications circles Gergen is most infamous for having served as director of communications for President Reagan, where in pioneered many antidemocratic precedents (Hertsgaard, 1988).

Finally, the American Assembly's chief operating officer, David H. Mortimer, is a former investment banker with close ties to various Rockefeller interests: he is a member of the Imperial Brain Trust that is known as the Council on Foreign Relations (Shoup and Minter, 1977), and is the former vice chairman of Scenic Hudson, Inc., and is a director of the Scenic Hudson Land Trust (for more critical information on these Rockefeller-linked groups, see Barker, 2008a).

This paper has provided the first critical overview of the life of William Benton, the founder of an important liberal foundation that has, over the past decades, exerted a strong influence over the evolution of the progressive media reform in the United States (Barker, Submitted). In many respects this paper should raise more questions than it has answered, as it has provided a critical exploration of the background of a

critical figure in the history of communications research who is rarely (if ever) mentioned by contemporary media scholars. Whether one considers William Benton to be a media saviour or social engineer (or somewhere in between) is beside the point. This article has demonstrated that William Benton was a key figure in elite media circles whose work focused on the task of manufacturing consent (Herman and Chomsky, 1988). Thus media scholars need to determine whether the legacy William left, in the form of the Benton Foundation, is working to promote a media landscape that bolsters democracy or plutocracy. This is a simple task, but an urgent one nonetheless, because at this critical juncture (McChesney, 2007) the life of the majority of the citizens of the planet, no less, is at stake.

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