



openDemocracy

Policing the unthinkable

Bob McChesney

The global media are integrating and their ownership is concentrating in fewer hands. This process threatens to undermine democracy. We need more independent and non-commercial media to challenge the corporate stranglehold on the culture.

Over the past two decades, as a result of neoliberal deregulation and new communication technologies, the media systems across the world have undergone a startling transformation. There are now fewer and larger companies controlling more and more, and the largest of them are media conglomerates, with vast empires that cover numerous media industries.

Media industries are barely competitive in the economic sense of the term. The giants do compete ferociously, but they do so under the rules of oligopolistic markets, meaning they have far greater control over their fate than those in truly competitive markets. It also means that it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, for newcomers to enter these markets as viable players.

By most theories of liberal democracy, such a concentration of media power into so few hands is disastrous for the free marketplace of ideas, the bedrock upon which informed self-government rests. The key to making markets work in the consumers' interest is that they be open to newcomers, but the present

conglomerate-dominated markets are not even remotely competitive in the traditional sense of the term.

This is not a new problem for capitalist media. In fact, in the United States, it was nothing short of a crisis a century ago, as one-newspaper towns and chain newspapers terminated competition in the American newspaper market, then the primary purveyor of journalism. Journalism at the time was still quite partisan, whence the political crisis that resulted from virtual monopoly. It was one thing for newspapers to be opinionated when there were several in a community and it was relatively easy to enter the market. It was quite another thing to have opinionated journalism when there were monopoly newspapers and they stridently advocated the political positions of their owners and major advertisers.

We report, you decide

The solution to this problem was the birth of professional journalism, based on the idea that news should not be opinionated. To cite the slogan for Murdoch's US Fox News Channel: "We report, you decide." In theory



news would be produced by trained professional editors and reporters, free of the political bias of owners and advertisers, who would concede control over editorial matters to the professionals.

Readers could trust the news, and not worry about the paucity of local newspapers. Of course, professional journalism was hardly neutral – it tended to volley within the walls of elite opinion and call that neutrality. Even after professionalism became the rule in the United States by mid-century, it was never pristine. But it did serve to make the concentrated ownership of media appear less significant than it would otherwise have been.

In the past 15 years, the autonomy granted professional journalists has come under sustained attack. As many of the major newspaper chains and TV networks have been gobbled up – at high prices – by the giant conglomerates, the traditional deal between owners and journalists has made less and less business sense. Why, accountants ask, should a firm's news division generate less profit than its film studio, its music division, or its TV networks?

Accordingly, newsrooms have increasingly been subjected to commercial rationalisation: reduced staff, less controversial and labour intensive investigative reporting, and more easy-to-cover but trivial stories about celebrities, crime and royal families. News is increasingly pitched to the upscale audience desired by advertisers; in the United States, business news has therefore become a huge part of the overall news, while labour news has fallen from view. The measure of the decline in professional journalism is indicated in every major study of journalists over the past decade. Anecdotally, one need only read the laments of former journalists to see that something fundamental has taken place.

New media provides competition?

With the decline of professionalism as a

protection against concentrated control over the media, a new reason to keep things as they are has emerged: the internet will set us free. New digital technologies are so powerful that they will provide a platform for a massive wave of new media competitors who will slay the existing giant corporate media dinosaurs. A golden age of competition is returning.

It is true that the internet is changing a great deal about our lives. In certain media industries, especially music and book publishing, it is forcing a thoroughgoing re-evaluation of the reigning business models. But the evidence so far is emphatic: the internet is not going to launch viable commercial competitors to the existing media giants. Their existing market power trumps the possibilities of the new technologies. There is a plus side for internet journalism; people can access news media from across the planet. But sustaining doing good journalism requires resources and institutional support. There is nothing in the technology or the market that provides either of these to internet upstarts.

Not behind closed doors

A key reason the internet will not set us free is the thoroughly corrupt nature of communication policy making in the United States, and, to varying extents, worldwide. New technologies – often developed by public subsidy – could be used to provide for a new sector of commercial and non-commercial media if public policies were so inclined. But they are not, and they are not for a reason: important licences and subsidies are routinely doled out to media corporations behind closed doors – in the public's name but without the public's informed consent.

In the United States, for example, the premier licences for monopolistic rights to broadcasting frequencies on the scarce airwaves have been provided at no charge to a handful of corporations including Disney,

In the past 15 years, the autonomy granted professional journalists has come under sustained attack



Viacom and News Corporation. A trained chimpanzee could make millions with VHF TV licenses in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Someone with the cunning of a Rupert Murdoch or a Sumner Redstone can do far better than that.

This points to the daunting task that faces those who wish to challenge the corporate media status quo. The nature of our media industries results not from some natural "free" market but from explicit government policies and subsidies. As the media firms have grown larger, their power over government policymakers has turned into a vice-grip. They alone control the means of communication, meaning they can shape the manner in which debates over media policy are disseminated and understood.

Global media system

The internet is not all that has changed in the past decade. There has emerged a global commercial media system during the same period. Twenty years ago, one thought of media systems as national phenomena first, with imports a secondary consideration. Today this is reversed. We must see the global system first, then make allowances for differences between nations and regions. This global media system is an indispensable part of the rise of global neoliberal capitalism. Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine "globalisation" without the emergence of the international commercial media system. Through these systems transnational firms have access to unprecedented markets, broadcasting content that inevitably supports the values necessary to keep the system ticking.

At the top of the global media system is a tier of fewer than ten transnational giants – AOL Time Warner, Disney, Bertelsmann, Vivendi Universal, Sony, Viacom and News Corporation – that together own all the major film studios and music companies, most of the

cable and satellite TV systems and stations, the US television networks, much of global book publishing and much, much, more. By 2001 nearly all of the first tier firms rank among the 300 largest corporations in the world, several among the top 50 or 100. As recently as 20 years ago, one would have been hard-pressed to find a single media company among the 1,000 largest firms in the world. Or, to consider the growth of the media sector in another manner, consider the AOL-Time Warner merger, the largest in business history. That deal, valued at around \$160 billion, was nearly 500 times larger than any media deal in history.

The global media system is rounded out by a second tier of 60-80 firms. Most of them are powerhouses in North America or Europe, but several are based in Asia and a few in Latin America. These firms are competitors in some markets but are often collaborators, partners and

customers in other markets. They are all wed to the neoliberal deregulatory model that has permitted them to grow wealthy and profitable. The governments of the United States and its trusty sidekick, Britain, have dedicated themselves to the advancement of these firms' global operations. In many nations, these powerhouses and four or fewer other firms dominate the media systems.

Profit over public service

Although the global media system produces much of value, it is deeply flawed when measured by a democratic yardstick. Journalism tends to assume and support the patterns described above for the United States, undermining civic participation and encouraging business domination of social life. Notions of public service invariably fall before the altar of profit, as Andrew Graham argued in the first issue of openDemocracy. The collapsing of professional standards in journalism, as Jean Seaton suggested in her contribution, is one of the inevitable outcomes.

*The link, once it would
difficult to imagine
"globalisation"
without the emergence
of the international
commercial media
system.*



Public service broadcasting finds itself the square peg in a neoliberal hole, and survives as an increasingly commercialised affair only because it is popular, not because it can be justified in market ideology. The great strength of the commercial system is its ability to generate commercially marinated light entertainment, which suits perfectly the sort of depoliticised and inegalitarian society as exists in neoliberalism's spawning ground, the United States.

The media giants themselves assert that their power permits them to stand up to huge governments with large armies and report the tough stories that would otherwise be neglected. The record, however, points to the contrary. The annual lists of reporters who have been arrested, beaten, harassed, and murdered worldwide include precious few employees of the media giants. They are mostly freelance reporters or journalists working with small-scale media. The media giants might claim that this is because tyrannical thugs fear them, but then one would expect to see the media giants aggressively pursuing the stories that put those valiant journalists in hot water. They aren't.

Consider the case of China, where the corporate media lust for a massive market locked in by a police state has seen News Corporation, Disney, Viacom and all the rest trade in their scruples for a crack at the jackpot. A jackpot that Murdoch seems to have won. The moral of the story is clear: the global media giants use their market power to advance their interests and the wealth of their shareholders, and to preclude any public

involvement in democratic media policy making. It is a poison pill for democracy.

The solution follows from the critique. We need to democratise media policy-making, and take it from the hands of the self-interested media corporations. We need to determine how to establish a well-funded viable and healthy non-profit and non-commercial media sector, independent of big business and government. We need to maintain a strong and vibrant non-commercial public broadcasting service that provides a full range of programming to the entire population. We need strict ownership and public interest regulations for media firms that are granted broadcast or cable licences. And we need policies that promote the creation of small commercial media as well as media workers' trade unions. In combination, these reforms would go a long way toward democratising our media systems and blasting open the corporate grip over our political cultures. It is not necessarily the most important task for those who favour a more egalitarian, democratic and humane world, but it is nonetheless indispensable. It will not be an easy task, but that makes it no less important.

23 October 2001

Copyright © Bob McChesney, 2001. Published by openDemocracy. Permission is granted to reproduce articles for personal and educational use only. Commercial copying, hiring and lending is prohibited without permission. If this has been sent to you by a friend and you like it, you are welcome to join the openDemocracy network.

Bob McChesney is the author of seven books, including *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times* (New Press, 2000). He is also a Professor of communication at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and co-editor of *Monthly Review*. His website is www.robertmcchesney.com.