Mass Media and Democracy

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INTRODUCTION

In March 1986, a debate took place between the author and then Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Chairman, Mark Fowler, Sr., about trends in media ownership and the issue of access to mass media outlets. After several minutes of exchange, Chairman Fowler, rather exasperated, said, "Look, if you have a message you wish to propagate, put it on a T-shirt." This response to the overwhelming evidence I had brought to bear on the issue of media concentration and access for marginal voices characterizes the deregulatory mood of the Reagan years.

Chairman Fowler advocated that public property, in this case the electromagnetic spectrum, be sold to the highest bidder; that television and radio channels be auctioned to those who now hold the licenses, thereby effectively doing away with the need for the organization he chaired. Though he failed to achieve this goal, he did manage to raise the legal number of stations a single person or corporation may own from seven AM, seven FM, and seven television stations to twelve each. Fowler had proposed that the limitation rule by abolished entirely by 1990, but Congress and the motion picture industry, fearing increased power of the television networks, managed to keep the number at twelve.

He was also sympathetic to the cable industry's desire to abolish the "must carry" rule for cable system operators, which stated that they had to carry
significantly viewed" local television signals. The opposition to the "must carry" rule and the attempt to make station ownership unlimited are in direct conflict with a long-held position in U.S. broadcast policy, which emphasizes localism rather than concentrated media control. The consequences of deregulation are, as Fowler rightly predicted, far reaching, for even at this relatively constrained level, "many financial analysts regarded the 12-12-12 rule as one reason for the explosive demand for broadcast and cable properties that sparked a media-merger mania beginning in 1983" (Head and Sterling, 1990, p. 453).

Fowler's views were consistent with the Reagan ideological mindset, which aimed to "get government off the back of the people." He referred to the commission he was appointed to head as "the last of the New Deal Dinosaurs." In broadcasting, this translates into abolishing governmental oversight of the owners and operators of the electronic media. Many have recognized this bias to be most pronounced among members of the Republican party.

From the beginning of the use of television in political campaigning, this ideological prejudice has been pronounced. As Vance Packard observed in 1959, during his first presidential campaign to exploit Madison Avenue's talents, the Democrats had difficulty lining up a suitable agency because the major agencies did not want to alienate the Republican businessmen who were their commercial clients. Even though the powerful agency executives denied any bias, their personal political sympathies were exposed in the Senate's postmortem report. According to the report, "officials of the thirty-seven leading agencies gave $51,000 to the Republicans, nothing to the Democrats." (Packard, 1957, p. 170).

This ideological bias, which wedes political power with media control, may have actually increased since Packard's investigation. For instance, it has been widely observed that during their terms in the White House, Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan, "made the most severe attacks in this century on freedom of information and of the press" (Bagdikian, 1990, p. 8; Knoll, 1991). Nevertheless, both politicians enjoyed overwhelming endorsement for re-election from newspaper publishers across the nation. Likewise, as Bagdikian observes, Reagan received stunningly uncritical coverage by the Washington news corps (p. 8). The reason for the apparent contradiction is simple: Both made extraordinary moves to support corporate concentration and increased profit taking in the media.

Chairman Fowler, as a political appointee, championed this ideological proclivity, which led him to attempt to dismantle the practice of licensing broadcasters. Under the current regulatory structure, broadcast licenses facilitate two important functions. First, the license permits the broadcaster to use this public resource for personal economic and political gain. Second, FCC threats to withdraw this lucrative privilege (which has been carried out less than twenty times since 1934) coerces the broadcaster to serve the public interest, connivance and necessity," as stated in the 1934 Radio Act. According to Fowler's reasoning, permanent sale of electromagnetic channels would lead to two desirable consequences: (1) regulation by market mechanisms and (2) a massive down scaling of both oversight and the organization charged with that responsibility, the FCC.

Essentially, this debate centers on whether or not information is a commodity. Two fundamental questions emerge: (1) Is information somehow more essential to the democratic process than other commodities such as shoes and groceries, and (2) What, if any, threat does chain ownership in several media and unrelated industries pose to the democratic process? Since these questions speak to a style of governance, the issue of power, manifest as hegemonic control, is logically implicated.

FAILURE OF THE DUALISTIC PARADIGM

Several writers have critically explored media issues. This literature tends to focus on two familiar categories: content and form. Generally, this dichotomy has created two approaches to media criticism. One concentrates on structural/economic issues, while the other focuses on aesthetic and psychological effects. In the interest of parsimony and heuristic vigor, this dichotomous mindset often distorts, or even denies, the integral relationship between these two categories. But more importantly, understanding the integral nature of media power and how media apparatuses self-perpetuate, is almost impossible.

This Cartesian legacy of separating structural from content analysis prevents one from appreciating that hegemonic power is a synthetic, indeed systemic (as opposed to structural), phenomenon that has both economic and ideological properties. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the integral nature of hegemony and its consequences for the democratic ideal of informed choice.

Two related assumptions are made: (1) The prevailing content/form division is primarily the result of disciplinary territoriality, rather than essential qualities of the data, and (2) this division is spurious, and thus all explanations based on it fail to elucidate the symbiotic interrelatedness that constitutes true hegemonic power.

Two processes are critically addressed, first separately, and then synthetically so that their fundamental interrelatedness may be appreciated: (1) the epistemic force of electronic logocentrism, that is, "seeing is believing," and (2) the accelerating trend toward monopoly ownership and control of multimedia institutions. A note of caution is necessary at this point. It would be a mistake to think of these two processes as subsystems within a supra-system of hegemony. Despite the pseudoscientific rhetoric of general systems theory, mechanistic causality and structural hierarchy are not blindly presupposed.
The acceleration toward centralized control and the myopic nature of media programming are concurrent threats to the classical goal of rhetorical theory and democracy. In order to mount an informed investigation of the first question about the nature of information and its relationship to democratic behavior, the origin and character of rhetorical ideals should be addressed.

DOING DEMOCRACY

The rise of classical rhetoric from Corax through Aristotle and Cicero, and rearticulated by John Stuart Mill, testifies to the hope that disputes can be resolved by reasoned argumentation rather than armed conflict. There is one essential proviso to this ideal of democracy. Equal opportunity (if not ability) to debate and to hear all opinions is postulated. This means free and equal access to information. Stated with Mill’s economic metaphors, decisions can be guided by democratic principles if, and only if, the marketplace of ideas is free of coercion. Censorship cuts in two directions. First, the right of expression is obviously curtailed. Second, and not so obvious, if just one person suffers prior restraint, then the right of all others to hear that opinion is violated and democracy is compromised. This is important because that one idea may have been the best solution or may have significantly added to the dialogue. The force of reason, as it is manifest in the process of debate, is the hallmark of modern political action because reason does not recognize exogenous power as a criteria of authority."

The greatest threat to reason is private interests which reject the idea of “fair play.” Private interests are often manifested as greed and far. Under the rubric of private interests, “what is good for me,” is defined as what makes me “better off,” or even “superior” to others. “What is good for me,” therefore, has nothing to do with anything that transcends the personal ego-sphere, such as blind justice and equality, except possibly by accident. Rather, vital interests have to do with the accumulation of personal power.

Thus, deliberation and debate can be facilitated by one of two ways: either through the transcendent power of reason, or the extrinsic force by competing private interests. Cynical power disdains the force of reason. A practical example of the transcending force of democratic reason, in the face of contingent personal interest, is the spectacle of a candidate publicly, and often painfully, conceding to the mathematics of majority rule. The cynicism of personal interests, manifested as careerism and the modus operandi of modern competition, is epitomized by the “take no prisoners” attitude of Lee Atwater.

Make no mistake that the greatest proponents of forensic and deliberative modes of communication have been logicians. The ability to recognize fallacious reasoning, and to judge the validity of claims of fact, are instrumental to the dialogical, democratic process. The Western ideal of individual liberty has been based almost exclusively on a vision of liberal education that emerged out of the sophist tradition with its quadrivium. The purpose of studies in logic, dialectic, grammar, and rhetoric was to ensure that citizens would be equipped to partake in democratic institutions. This culture presupposed that its participants were as well informed in all fields, including morality, as possible. This point is reiterated in every major treatise on rhetoric throughout the Western tradition.

After 500 years of democratic theory and behavior, two trends converged to destroy the classical ideals of legal and political oratory and to thrust into dominance ceremony and entertainment. One was the collapse of the early (republican) Roman Empire, and the second was the emergence of Christianity as a “monolithic feudalism” (Abelson, 1906, p. 8). This history should be reviewed so that a concern for the common good and public discourse can be resurrected.

THE COLLAPSE OF ROMAN REPUBLICANISM

Active and rigorous reflection on how to act democratically came to an end in the classical period after Quintilian (A.D. 35–95). But the beginning of the decay of democratic institutions occurs with the death of Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 B.C.), about sixty years before Quintilian. Cicero is known as a major figure in the history of philosophy, law, and literature. He rose to the stature of a great statesman and the position of Consul by 63 B.C. After the assassination of Caesar in 44 B.C., he became a major opponent of Antony who had him executed the following year.

The ascension of Antony to power marked the fall of the republic and the rise of dictatorial government. Antony was succeeded by Emperor Augustus Octavian, who ruled from 30 B.C. to A.D. 14. A series of military dictators followed Octavian until the collapse of the empire in 410. Prentice Meador (1972) described this era as inimical to creative oratory, for as the power of the monarchy increased, the free speech, upon which the self-governing bodies depended, became too risky. The dynamic issues of the past disappeared as the organizational requirements of empire and accountability proved too disparate to reconcile.

Of the three areas of life that demanded rhetorical skills and liberal education—law, politics, and entertainment—only entertainment remained viable for public participation. The courts became simply the forum for debate over property rights and the intricacies of trade. Nancy Harper (1979) noted that the practice of law became a profession, and “legal technicians, who could interpret the complex details of written law to the satisfaction of the ruling class began to replace orators who could persuade large audiences of the justice of their case” (p. 65). The empire had grown from a relatively small community to a metropolis, with citizens living in
every part of the known world. The democratic vitality of republicanism waned as the empire ossified.

The far-flung empire relied increasingly on the permanence of written contracts, which came to supersede oratory. Communication became less an act than a fixture. Morality was replaced by legality/technicality. Deliberative speech became extinct, and the senate was reduced to an acquisitive body. "Secret police infiltrated the general population, eager to stamp out 'sedition' even in the private sector. Serious deliberative discussion of the sort taught by Isocrates and practiced by Cicero became virtually impossible" (Harper, 1979, p. 65).

For the first time in the history of human communication theory and practice, the domain of public communication was restricted to epideictic, or ceremonial "speech to entertain." "Rhetoric" came to signify an atheoretical set of banal formulas for elocution; it was reduced to a set of often copied rules for delivery. Hence, the widely accepted practice began of referring to this period as the "Second Sophistic." Speech manuals proliferated while democracy withered.

The Aristotelian ideal of broad knowledge and sound morality found its last advocate in Quintillian. Rhetoric became "scholastic" in the worst sense of the word. The sense of the world as a place to be discovered and explored changed into a resource to be managed by aristocratic powers in league with, and legitimized by, institutionalized divine right. Whereas discovery assumes something not already known, dogma presumes to know everything already, so there is no need for deliberation.

THE RISE OF CHRISTIANITY

The second major shift that led to the decline of democratic behavior was the rise of the Christian theocracy. The conflict over canon centered on the debate between probability and absolute truth. The classical curriculum was condemned by the new Christian power as a "pagan" art. Rhetorical behavior postulated that all evidence is contingent and that a hypothesis is to be tested and retested. Such relativity clashed with Christian revelation. For the Christian clergy, rhetoric meant nothing more than persuasion, and it was practiced by church leaders in their efforts to win converts. In the new world order, skillful deliberative efforts to determine the reliability and validity of claims was seen as either irrelevant or, more minaciously, as spiritual/political contamination. The repudiation of the classical rhetoric by feudal landlords and church leaders limited it again to the arenas of ceremony and entertainment.

THE POWER OF VIDEOCENTRISM

Today, public discourse is regarded by many informed observers as little more than entertainment. According to Postman (1985), political philosophy cannot be done on television as it could in the pages of the Federalist Papers. Nevertheless, the politics of the real is an integral part of television.

Television and radio present a "now . . . this" world-view, sustained by a mode of discourse that is incoherent and without context. The phrase "now . . . this" is indicative of a world-view that signifies to the isolated audience member, "that what one has just heard or seen has no relevance to what one is about to hear or see, or possibly to anything one is ever likely to hear or see" (Postman, 1985, p. 99). Electronic messages are fragmentary and alogical. Reasoned discourse is impossible in such a mode of "communicating." The electronic media epitomize the world-view of positivism, in that knowledge comes to mean facts without implications, background, or connections. The consequence is both an atomized content and audience.

The world of entertainment is timeless and irrelevant. The "real money" for writers, actors, producers, and others is made in "residuals," a potentially endless source of revenue generated by "reruns." For this to be possible, scripts must be written in a "timeless" fashion. The commandment of commercial timelessness is this: Story lines and jokes must not refer to anything of current historical or political relevance. For instance, if one were to replay a joke about Henry Cabot Lodge, or even Spiro T. Agnew, to today's most lucrative audiences, they would not understand it. Consequently, jokes and stories such as those told on "Three's Company," "Bonanza," "I Love Lucy," "The Waltons," and "The Cosby Show," are written so as to be totally irrelevant and, as such, capable of selling products not yet conceived. The world of syndication is purposefully irrelevant, and therefore perpetually lucrative. "The age of simulation thus begins with a liquidation of all referentials—worse: by their artificial resurrection in systems of signs, a more ductile material than meaning, in that it lends itself to all systems of equivalence, all binary oppositions and all combinatory algebra" (Baudrillard, 1983, p. 4).

The magic power of television to transcend time and space, to equate everything with everything else, characterizes its politics of images as apathetically irrelevant and innocently objective. It is the "hyperreal" that shortcircuits any distinction between the real and the imaginary, the true and the false (Baudrillard, 1983). For this reason it is the favored medium for political consultants. Television exploits the power of emotion, not reason.

Plato's allegory of the cave suggests that metaphysics has an inescapable political dimension. More recently, Marx and Nietzsche have insisted that the sense of what is real has profound implications for understanding, in addition to the relationship between knowledge, discourse, and power. Herein lies the self-evident power of presence repeatedly reiterated from Descartes to Husserl. Consciousness of reality exploits the tautology of identity in order to inoculate itself from suspicion. Consequently, consciousness could never possibly be "false." Thus common sense ascends to the throne of dishistorized and depolitized fact. This power claims the simple innocence
of the indisputable "what is the case," which Wittgenstein concisely expresses at the beginning of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*:

1. The world is all that is the case.
1.1. The world is the totality of facts, not of things.
1.11 The world is determined by the facts, and by their being all the facts.
1.12 For the totality of facts determines what is the case, and also whatever is not the case.
1.13 The facts in logical space are the world.
1.2 The world divides into facts.

(1971, p. 41)

This concise articulation of the modern positivistic metaphysic leaves no room for the process of deliberation. Reality is intolerant. Quality and historical perspective are not valued by this mentality. Furthermore, marginal examples of "the real" are defined by the dominant viewpoint as insane and/or criminal.

Jacques Derrida has rekindled interest in the power of metaphysic with his critique of logocentrism and phenoncentrism, otherwise called the metaphysics of presence. The force and appeal of electronic media are a consequence of the illusion that they facilitate an immediate presencing of "real" events that are spatially and/or temporarily absent.

Humans have striven for centuries to transcend space and time. Each new medium has displaced previous ones in an ever-accelerating effort to invent the perfect method of conveying factual information. The search for the perfect medium, from swamis, prophets, mathematical science and holography, to multicamera and multidimensional high definition television systems, reveals the compulsion to realize a medium without a rhetorical dimension or bias. The desire for the perfect medium not only presupposes a faith in mimetic simulation, but strives to create the real by making it present. The ideal medium is absent when information is made present; it is one in which the "noise" of the medium is reduced to zero, as the "signal" is relayed in pristine innocence. The fatalism indigenous to such a world can be tersely articulated: Reality simply is the case (meaning: "nothing personal old man, but I overrule you because fact is on my side, so stop spewing subjective nonsense"). The truth-sayer has the power to define the world. Knowledge is power.

The epistemological consequences of this theoretical demarché are a matter of great debate. Epistemology is important to power relations, but to speak of epistemology is already a complex process. Prior to thinking about reality, there is already a prereflective set of cultural postulates that limit the nature of the world. Such cultural postulates, as Marx recognized in his

theory of false consciousness, posit blind prejudices about the nature of the human beast and its relations with the natural, the supernatural, and other social creatures. The prevailing political reality is not even recognized as being "the prevailing" or "definitive world-view." Indeed, the reflective attitude that is manifested in the concept of "world-view," already presupposes the contingency of perspectivism, which is, ironically, the foundation of hypothetical, trial and error scientific behavior, despite the pretensions of positivists to identify the data they generate with naturally occurring phenomena (reification).

The authority of the "prevailing" political reality stems from a mentality that recognizes it to be "natural" and, as such, immutable. To most persons, socioeconomic inequality and oppression are simply accepted as facts of life. To speak of "alternative realities," presupposes a reflexive mentality that defines facts as merely contingent and arbitrary. Planners, "visionaries," "utopians," and industrialists share an attitude that transcends the world-as-given and thus are able to postulate a different world order. Although their values may conflict, they share a deeper belief in the veracity of free will.

Contrary to this freedom is causal pragmatism. The word pragmatism has come to mean a "realistic" (fatal) and clear vision. Hence, the determinism that is revealed in cultural postulates makes it difficult, if not pointless, to speak in metaphysical terms about "false" and "true" consciousness, base and superstructure, signifier and signified. Pragmatism gives validity to facts, so that they are beyond challenge. This is the true power of methodology and media.

Like Plato, Nietzsche and Antonio Gramsci (1971) recognized the total insidiousness of such "organic," mystifying power. This is what Roland Barthes (1972) called the "pseudo-physic" of artificial, dehistorized language that presents the relationship between the signifier and signified as a powerful *fait accompli*, or natural fact. According to Barthes, this process pre-empts deliberation by "fixating" the world so that it at last becomes "computable" (1972, p. 155).

With his theory of hegemony, Gramsci illustrated cultural postulates to be something not merely secondary or marginal, like the Marxian notion of superstructure, or postreflective, like the notion of ideology. Hegemony saturates all aspects of life and constitutes the quality and power of common sense. Common sense is the day-to-day meaning of experience, or the reality that is presumed to exist *sui generis*. Common sense is the point from which all mundane and extra-mundane "interpretations" are initiated and, thus, is the most fundamental point of view and the first and most pervasive bias.

Likewise, Harold Laswell's famous theory of agenda setting does not appreciate the power of hegemony. Laswell's liberal individualism led him to argue that the mass media do not tell persons what to think, but what to
think about. Gramsci’s notion of hegemony goes much further to argue that hegemonic forces specify what is thinkable. Raymond Williams argued that hegemonic thought/reality

sees the relations of dominance and subordination, in their forms as practical consciousness, as in effect a saturation of the whole process of living—not only of political and economic activity, not only of manifest social activity, but of the whole substance of lived identities and relationships, to such a depth that the pressure and limits of what can ultimately be seen as a specific economic, political, and cultural system seem to most of us the pressures and limits of simple experience and common sense (1977, p. 109).

Hegemony is something other than the articulate “upper level,” or “superstructure” of ideology. Furthermore, hegemonic forms of control are experientially based, for they do not participate in the causal metaphysics of manipulation. Hegemony is “a lived system of meanings and values—constitutive and constituting—which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming” (Williams, 1977, p. 110). Hegemony constitutes a sense of the absolute because it is experiential. The identification of truth with fact is the Archean point of media power.

It is assumed that the ideal medium would be one that is utterly invisible and, therefore, would make an event immediately present so that its “natural truth” may be directly known. This search also presupposes that reality is a singularly simple thing that can be grasped in toto. This sense of the real, as being indubitably given, is behind the power of the Cartesian cogito ergo sum, as well as live broadcasts of news “as it happens.” The force of self-evidence as “direct experience” is such that it never occurs to viewers that it can be questioned. This is the basis of blind prejudice in Gadamer’s (1975) sense. Behaviorally, this bias is manifested as intolerance. This immediacy is the enemy of context and history and, ultimately, the classical logic on which democratic discourse is based. The “truth” of “reality” has the last word in any discourse. Dissenting opinions are defined as merely subjective, unreliable views.

Gebser (1985), in his description of modernity, attempted to demonstrate that visual metaphors are used to describe the world. Hence those who have wisdom, who have grasped reality, are visionaries; when a person has finally grasped the truth of something, he or she may say, “I see”; truth is where the light is. With regard to television, news programs are commonly called “eye witness” this or that, and of course, there is the omniscient CBS eyeball logo reminiscent of the figure on U.S. currency. As McLuhan recognized, television extends the sense of vision, so that the audience may gain the technological power of surveillance. But this surveillance is focused, which means that a contingent ideology or camera-angle view of reality is provided. Videocentrism is promoted by television. Seeing is believing. Herein lies

the epistemic force of videocentrism and the power of modern perspectival metaphysics. The problem, as Gebser rightly discerned, is the essential characteristic of perspectivism, which postulates the narrow sector, or slice of reality, and inflates it to the status of world. Consequently, because moderns put utter faith in the metaphysics of presence, they are highly susceptible to televisual delusion. The world-view propagated by television, is a camera angle controlled by commercial interests. Nevertheless, this world has the metaphysical power of truth.

A case in point is that study after study has demonstrated that television is now not only the most commonly consulted source of information in the United States, but that it is consistently ranked by survey respondents as the most credible of all news sources. More precisely, the Roper Organization has conducted annual image studies on television. One question that has been asked every year since 1959 is about the comparative performance of social institutions. Responses indicate a consistent increase in levels of audience confidence in television, from an initial 59 percent (1959) rating, as doing a “good” or “excellent” job, to 74 percent in 1984.

In their prodigious review of all available research, Comstock et al. (1978) summarized the shift in media allegiance from 1959 to the early 1970s by noting that television also overtook newspapers as the medium people would be most inclined to believe “if you got conflicting or different reports of the same news story” (Comstock et al., 1978, p. 135). Additionally, television surpassed newspapers in the proportion of people who say it gives the most complete news coverage. Between 1960 and 1970, television also replaced newspapers as the most credible medium (Comstock et al., 1978, p. 136).

Such surveys of the public’s perception of relative media credibility repeatedly demonstrate the power of the logocentric/videocentric metaphysical to determine what is the common reality/truth. The argument can be made that the trend of increasing reliance on the visual medium indicates an adaptation of the population to a technological potentiality that evinces the hegemony of logocentric will-power-drive; a drive that is pushing for technologies of virtual reality, a concurrent and competing world of computer simulation (Baudrillard, 1983).

By seeming less intrusive than previous media, television is a form of stealth technology. The viewer moves through worlds with the perspective of a fly on the wall—indeed worlds where the fourth wall is always missing—hyperspace. The medium and its influence on the message does not approach zero but, because of its surreptitious nature, its syntax overwhelms the semantic dimension so that, as McLuhan recognized, it becomes the message. The structural semiotic is the semantic. This is the power of the metaphysics of presence, the lust for armchair eavesdropping, with all its simplicity, convenience, and lack of involvement. As Baudrillard (1983) described the experience, it is the “discrete charm of the second-order simulacra,” that has drawn humanity to invent one medium after another in
the search for perfect knowledge, or what Richard Rorty (1980) called the “mirror of nature.” The essence of the panoptic experience is vicarious titillation.

What is being argued here is that as media become more “realistic” in their power of reproduction/modeling, the more convincing is their perspectival rhetoric. The perspectivalism of the mundane sensorium is wildly enhanced and celebrated. No longer is the goal to transcend the senses to reach external worlds not yet imagined, but rather the aim is to amplify the limitations of the senses and to embrace them in an implosion of perspectivalism. As a consequence, the true believer becomes increasingly provincial, since truth is only what can be immediately, personally experienced. Another consequence is that perspectival sensationalism leads to a rigid intolerance of alternative perspectives. The modern metaphysic may be stated thus, “I saw it with my own cameras.”

This saturating metaphysic of the televised world may not, in and of itself, constitute adequate evidence for concern regarding the degeneration of democratic processes. Indeed, many hail the technological power of distant and immediate vision as a liberator, thereby delivering the audience from a world of lies. Demonstrating a causal link between logocentric visual dominance and a decline in the efficacy of democratic institutions is difficult, if not impossible. Nevertheless, a correlation exists between a decline in voter involvement and the increased increase in mediated political discourse (Bagdikian, 1990, p. 235; Postman, 1985, pp. 125–141).

Despite this troublesome observation, another set of trends, which may be related, is arguably more onerous and insidious. The first trend is a predominance of entertainment values, such that humor serves a candidate better than cognitive complexity. This process is insidious because it disarms and ridicules television critics. After all, the point is that, “It’s only entertainment.” Hence, to suggest that the 1981 Persian Gulf War played on television like a super bowl, with the Super Bowl transformed into a massive pep rally for the “real” war, is practically anti-American because such a critique challenges the prevailing world-view. To suggest placing limits on entertainment values is defined by the dominant world-view as deviant, insane, or criminal. Everything, from political party conventions to the conduct of war, is to be choreographed.

The second trend, which is co-dependent with the first, is the public’s ever intensifying reliance on television. The third trend is the phenomenon of rapid cross-media monopolization, including all electronic and print media. The convergence of these three trends—the hypertrophy of entertaining stimuli for personal gratification, the televisual metaphysic, and restricted access to channels of communication—is resulting in an unprecedented concentration of enormous power, which poses a threat to democracy precisely because serious discussion is defined as illegitimate. When reality is abso-

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lutely known, discussion and critique are not simply banal speculation but thought-crimes.

A MODERN POTENTATE

This century is witness to a profound shift in attitude. The world is being made into an audience. Diversion is megabusiness because all persons “deserve a break today.” “Break” here does not mean respite from the clamor of modern life, but the opportunity to consume everything including incessant images of amplified calamity. The phrase “news junkie,” along with concerns about television “addiction,” have entered the popular and social studies lexicon.

First radio and then television brought the door-to-door salesman right into our most intimate midst. The prospect of “radio with pictures,” facilitated product demonstrations without the hassle of gaining entry into the home. In fact, this potential for advertising propelled the invention of television. Unlike previous media, electronic media, including telegraph (Western Union), telephone (AT&T), radio, and television have been controlled by huge oligopolies or outright monopolies.

The feeding frenzy of consumerism is manifest in virtually all the primary decisions that have formed broadcast media to date. Channel assignments have been redrawn by the FCC several times in order to give commercial broadcasters the pick of spectrum space and shunt educational interests to less favorable frequencies. Not until the late 1970s did television manufacturers, which hold large financial interests in commercial television broadcasting, finally bow to decades of pressure from government and consumer groups to include functional UHF tuners on sets, so that educational signals could be viewed.

Today, the force of concentrated ownership is even greater and is becoming global. A century ago, nearly every town and city in America had its own locally owned and operated daily paper, and many had more than one. Consequently, newspapers were not consolidated into a national advertising network that ignores local interests. Nowadays, because of chain ownership in newspapers and national networking in the electronic media, both geopolitical and ethnic regionalisms are being subverted by market segmentation. But the boundaries of political districts are drawn according to the 19,000 municipal entities, rather than the 210 retail markets. Nevertheless, American commercial media “are in the process of a revolutionary rearrangement in their circulation and content strategies to service the market areas and to move away from focusing their primary efforts on municipalities” (Bagdikian, 1990, p. 221).

As Bagdikian argued, candidates do not represent shopping malls; they do not run on the basis of markets. Hence, the country is witnessing a
widening gap between what a voter in a particular municipality needs to know and the content and coverage by the commercial media. According to Bagdikian, corporate ownership is not the cause of the gap, but it has rapidly widened it. Corporate owners have not conspired to debilitate the electorate. However, stockholder pressure to maximize quick profits from news subsidiaries has caused corporate owners to rearrange their circulation in order to appeal to large regional advertisers and to compete with television stations, “whose broad geographic reach has defined the 210 markets” (1990, p. 221). These 210 markets cover dozens and sometimes hundreds of municipalities, counties, school districts, and state and federal legislative districts.

Another gap, that is the consequence of making media decisions primarily on the basis of advertisers’ interests, is between audience needs and programming content. The intention of media executives is to appeal to only affluent consumers rather than the whole adult electorate. Consequently, entire populations of elderly and poor are disenfranchised and alienated by media content that is not designed for them. This is coupled with the growing uniformity of content that promotes a totalitarian sense of what is right and true.

Furthermore, mass advertising has been the essential cause of the death of small, local businesses and competition. Consequently, business, in the sense of true democratic, laissez-faire economic doctrine, is rapidly disappearing. According to Bagdikian, the demise of newspaper competition, in favor of the now universal one-paper city, is the result of large regional and national merchants aiming at huge audiences over wide geographic areas. Their reliance on mass circulation has forced newspapers to run each other out of business, so that every major city in the United States has only one winner.

Generally, the survivor can attribute its success to the deep pockets of its chain owner. Once the victory is secured, the winner can cut news content and increase the number of advertising inches and rates at will. The Gannett Company (USA Today and eighty-seven other dailies) has demonstrated this scenario time and again. In fact, no other industrialized nation has such a paucity of media competition.

The consequent problem posed by mass circulation is twofold. Small businesses cannot afford to play the national ad game, and even if, for some reason they could, they would be reaching thousands of consumers that never pass their neighborhood locations. Compounding these problems, most media are owned or interlocked with multinational corporations that manufacture everything imaginable, resulting in an “incestuous giantism” that leads to the peculiar situation in which corporations like GE, which acquire RCA and thus NBC in 1986, now effectively buy advertising from themselves. Furthermore, such giant multinational operations, which are sensitive to foreign policy and news, are hostile to investigative reporters.

And increasingly, through their media acquisitions, news services are owned by these companies.

Perhaps as a consequence, the emergence of the relatively new journalistic principle of value-free discourse serves to bleach controversy and smother contrasting political viewpoints. As Bagdikian noted, “if all things are projected as value-free and as equally important, they all appear to have equal significance” (1990, p. 133). While the lack of controversy serves to create the “buying mood,” it camouflages behind rhetoric of objectivity.

While defenders of media oligopolies are correct when they argue that the number of media outlets is growing, the case is also true that the number of owners is declining, thus increasing their power. Real choice is disappearing. Since the mid-1960s, with profound acceleration during the 1980s, a media-industrial complex has emerged. There are now more than 25,000 outlets in the United States, yet only twenty-three corporations dominate the markets (controlling one-half or more of all sales) for newspapers, magazines, television, cable television systems, books, video rentals, computer software, and motion pictures. Many are conglomerates, such as Capital Cities, which are dominant in more than one media market. The trend toward concentration has been awesome. For instance, in 1981, twenty corporations shared the magazine market, which generated 11,000 titles. Today there are only three: Time Warner (Time, People, Sports Illustrated, Fortune, etc.); News Corp. Ltd./Murdoch (TV Guide, Seventeen, New York, etc.); and Hearst (Good Housekeeping, Cosmopolitan, etc.).

At issue is that conglomerate power, when fused with media power, can control information needed for democratic decision making. The banning of the book Counter-Revolutionary Violence, by Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman is an example of what corporate hegemonic interests can lead to. In this case, the book had already been produced and was on the verge of distribution, but because its ideological perspectives did not match that of its corporate publisher, Warner Modular Publications, Inc. (owned by Warner Communications), the corporate boss, William Sarnoff ordered Claude McCabe, the managing editor, to cancel all the ads for it and to destroy all 10,000 copies that had been printed (Bagdikian, 1990, pp. 31–35).

Sadly, every year a long list of reporters, editors, and even actors, such as Ed Asner, find themselves unemployed, not because they are incompetent or inaccurate, but because they stumble upon one of the owner’s sacred cows. Increasingly, editorial gatekeepers are being integrated into managerial ranks, in which the overriding value is the corporate imperative. When media stocks are traded on the big board beside stocks for other types of products, they must compete as if they were identical. But information constitutes reality/truth. The consequence for democracy is devastating because the media should not be evaluated simply in terms of their profitability.
The kind of relationship they have with the public is also important, for in a democratic society, the critical discussion of facts is vital.  

Not satisfied with the cynical practice of image advertising, like Dow Chemical's "Dow helps you do great things" theme, corporations are going into the ideology business directly, and at all levels. Corporations, seeking ever more control over content, have gone beyond the role of sponsor to that of producer. For instance, the Red Oaks Production Company was started in the mid-1980s by five of the nation's largest corporations—AT&T, Armstrong, Gillette, Xerox, and Ford—to ensure that exclusively corporate values and interests would be expressed in prime time television fiction.

**HYPOTHETICAL SOLUTIONS**

1. The federal government should restrict the practice of interlocking directorates. Half the media conglomerates are members of the Fortune 500 largest corporations with interlocks at the highest levels of banking and industry. Louis Brandeis referred to such linkages as "the endless chain." The twenty largest media conglomerates, which control 99 percent of everything U.S. citizens see and hear, are interlocked with such areas as agricultural business, airlines, coal and oil, banking, insurance, defense contractors, automobile sales, nuclear power, and nuclear weapons manufacturers.

   For instance, the *New York Times*, called "the most influential paper in America," is interlocked with Merck, Morgan Guaranty Trust, Bristol Myers, Charter Oil, Johns Manville, American Express, Bethlehem Steel, IBM, Scott Paper, Sun Oil, and First Boston Corporation (Bagdikian, 1990, p. 25).

   Another example is Time, Inc. According to Bagdikian, "Time, Inc. (before it became Time Warner) had so many interlocks it almost represented a plenary board of directors of American business and finance, including Mobil Oil, AT&T, American Express, Firestone Tire & Rubber Company, Mellon National Corporation, Atlantic Richfield, Xerox, General Dynamics, and most of the major international banks (Bagdikian, 1990, p. 25).

   It is to be expected that businesses will continue to attempt to influence public information, such as embarrassing publicity. Each major industrial enterprise maintains public relations departments and retains external agencies to manage the public imagination. The problem is that they now either own, or interlock with, most of the news media they wish to influence.

2. A progressive tax should be applied to advertising. Such a tax should be linked to the proportion of the total corporate budget allocated for advertising. The purpose would not be to destroy the socially useful functions of advertising, such as announcing new products, permitting comparisons, or providing price information, but to shift the power to influence media content away from advertisers to consumers. A progressive tax would limit the amount of advertising, so that subscription revenue would gain influence. This would also help alleviate the current situation in which mass advertising serves to maintain an "entry barrier" to new retailers (Fudenberg and Tirole, 1984; Bulow, Geanakoplos, & Klemperer, 1983) and politicians (Porter, 1976; Posner, 1975), rather than encourage product competition.

3. Editors should be elected by their journalist colleagues. This is common practice in Europe and alleviates the conflict of interest confronted by editors, who must serve two masters, that is, the economic and political interests of owners and the information needs of readers/viewers. Executive editors are increasingly integrated into the "managerial imperatives" of their umbrella corporations (Bagdikian, 1990, p. 233). Corporate bosses have linked editors' personal security to the interests of the bottom line, by giving bonuses based on annual profits and threatening those who fail to achieve assigned profit projections. Such practices result in a structural bias that favors the selection of content based, not on criteria of news value, but on the interests of readers and viewers who live in affluent neighborhoods. Postal zones and census data are regularly furnished by corporate managers to local chain editors for the purpose of tailoring content to affluent consumers.

   Two obstacles to the adoption of editorial elections are evident. First, owners charge that the election of executive editors usurps their right to manage their own property. Bagdikian noted that fully a third of chain editors do not feel free to publish news harmful to the interests of the parent firm (1990, p. 234). It is patently obvious why owners strive to instill that feeling in their editors, which is exactly why it should be relinquished.

   The second argument against elected editors is that this practice leads to office politics. But this sort of politics already plays a part in promotions. The difference is that in an election, the politics is far less influenced by nonjournalistic factors. For the same reason that it is universally regarded as professionally unacceptable for reporters or editors to accept personal bribes or favors to alter the news, a separation between institutional financial interests and news values must be maintained.

4. Expanded ownership by merger and acquisition should be limited by law. Despite claims to the contrary, First Amendment freedom is not violated because limiting expansion by merger and acquisition does not limit the right of corporations to initiate new outlets. Rather, such a limitation protects diversity while encouraging new enterprise.

5. The FCC should ban privately funded political campaign commercials. As in the other countries, such as England, France, and Germany, blocks of free time should be mandated to political parties based on the success they demonstrated in the previous election. These blocks should be measured in minutes rather than seconds, so that more informative messages can be broadcast. The donation of time should be part of the obligation of holding a broadcast license.

6. Local municipalities should regulate cable television just like other
utilities. Cable once offered a potential for true diversity. As a common
carrier, it originally resembled the organization of a utility. Initially, cable
system owners proclaimed the virtue of having no commercials and large
numbers of channels. Now, since cable systems are becoming part of the
portfolios of conglomerates like Time Warner, subscribers are paying ever
increasing rates to receive commercial signals. Treating cable television like
a utility would allow local governments to negotiate rates, numbers of chan-
nels (including local access), quality of service, distribution of service, and
taxation of service. If operated as a common carrier, like the telephone
service, channels could be offered for lease without prior stipulation of the
content. Since cable television would be subscriber driven, consumers,
rather than advertisers, would be the dominant influence on content selec-
tion.

7. Consumer groups should also be formed to protect the interests of
consumers. For instance, in Japan, a successful organization called Seikatsu
Kurabu Seikatsu Kyodo Kumiai (meaning “Life Co-operation”), may serve
as an example. In 1965, this organization was established by housewives
(the most activist group in Japan) in Setagaya Ward, Tokyo, to provide its
members with safe milk. Today Life Co-operation has thousands of active
members in Tokyo, Kanagawa, Saitama, Chiba, Nagano, and other areas.
The key to the success of this organization is that the retail/commercial
market is avoided. Products are bought directly from producers and dis-
tributed through members’ homes. Manufacturing facilities for goods such
as toiletries and clothes are also operated. Product price is kept low, in part,
because advertising costs and the wholesale and retail markups are avoided.
Such activities eventually influence local politics in favor of consumers.
Life Co-operation has demonstrated that advertising is not necessary to sell es-
cential products. This presents a profound implication—operating within
such an environment, media may be forced to turn back to consumers for
their revenue, which in turn would reinstate consumer interests as a vital
concern to those who shape media content.

8. The curriculum of college journalism students should be changed from
the traditional, professional orientation, which emphasizes the “objectivity
doctrine,” to a liberal arts approach that fosters an understanding of social,
economic, historical, and political contexts. Currently, the vocational ori-
entation of journalism education matriculates students who know how to use
a camera, but who do not know what to point it at or why. Furthermore,
the emphasis on objectivity leads to factually accurate stories with no context.
The search for facts, without context, bleeds reporting of meaning, making
the consequences and interrelationships of events difficult for citizens to
understand.

9. Citizens must be encouraged to support noncommercial media and to
initiate alternative outlets. For instance, Ms. magazine launched a “maga-
book” in July/August 1990, which was free of advertising. Thus far, Ms. has
published four, 100-page issues free of advertising and is currently soliciting
subscriptions in an effort to continue the practice.

10. Finally, another international commission, such as the Macbride
Commission of the late 1970s, should be organized by the United Nations in
order to begin the ongoing study of international media power. In light of
the stress on the biosphere, efforts to “synthesize wants” should be dis-
couraged.

CONCLUSION

If asked, “What do media salespersons sell?” “What is their product?” or
“What do they produce?” most individuals respond with answers such as,
“time,” “column inches,” “billboard space,” or “bus space.” All of these
answers describe the incidental part of how the value of media is measured,
but not the nature of the product. What media people produce is audiences
of varying value. The value of an audience is determined by size, demo-
graphics, psychographics, and, most important, socioeconomics.

All the entertaining content between commercial messages, whether it is a
news article, a centerfold, or a top 40 rock and roll song, is designed
fundamentally to attract and hold the attention of consumers. If a television
show fails to create and maintain an audience long enough for ad messages
to be consumed, this program is cancelled. Regardless of the aesthetic qual-
ities, spiritual enlightenment, psychological value, or sociopolitical rele-
cance, entertainment is designed and manufactured only to create audiences
for advertising.

The power of mass media, as conceptualized in the idea of hegemony,
breaks down the false dialectic that media managers often exploit when they
claim to only give the people what they want. The other side of the dialectic,
that the audience is conditioned by what it gets, is always denounced for
lack of causal evidence. Of course, the audience is a product of the media
and its content. Media managers create the audience their advertising clients
want.

Television, radio, and telephone are noise. As agents of diversion for profit
they demand attention. “The mass audience,” which mass media create, is
a technologically determined phenomenon. “Its” statistically derived pref-
erences are noted by commercial power elites and technologists as they
survey the vast belly of the beast, watching its every flinch and quiver. As
the lethargic leviathan changes channels, a behavioral wave, as in a football
stadium, occurs that is silent, unseen, and unconscious. Millions of switches
occur simultaneoulsy on the half hour that are coordinated by the central
programming schedule. This portends that just under the surface there
sleeps a giant of truly monumental proportions, a huge “market.”

The basic dilemma that democracy faces is that the power of metaphysics
and the concentration of media control are not likely to be reported by the
media, except in sporadic, incoherent episodes like the coverage of Sony’s 1989 purchase of Columbia Pictures, and Matsushita’s 1990 purchase of MCA, Inc. Even when reported, such stories are cast in the ideological frame that big is better, such stories are cast in the ideological frame that big is better, all commodities are identical, and regulation is evil.

Accountability is the uniquely democratic mechanism against the abuse of power. Checks and balances rely on a free flow of information and real choices. The alternative to accountability is faith in the social responsibility of corporations. In his popular book *Capitalism and Freedom*, Milton Friedman articulates the corporate sense of accountability as follows: “Few trends so thoroughly undermine the very foundations of our free society as the acceptance by our corporate officials of a social responsibility other than to make as much money for their shareholders as possible” (1962, p. 133). He presumes that there can be no legitimate collective or shared interests that might overrule personal freedom.

This challenges the raison d’etre of civilization. As Freud argued, compromise and discipline cause discontent, but to concur with Thomas Hobbes, the chaos of self-interests in perpetual conflict is even more painful and unproductive. There are only two ways to generate corporate accountability. The first is through business law and the restoration of genuine diversity and competition. This requires government action. The second, is for citizens to become organized, in a fashion similar to powerful consumers’ organizations in Japan.

NOTES

1. With regards to blocking freedom in information, Richard Nixon has been in court ever since he left office to thwart attempts by historians and biographers to gain access to his “personal” (though many of them no doubt have to do with government business while he was a government employee) papers. Under Nixon’s advise, on the last day he occupied the White House, Ronald Reagan became the first president in history to sign an executive order securing, by decree, his documents from any and all scrutiny. Because such an order is the law, there is little room for legal challenge.

2. Systems theory is merely a rhetoric of hierarchy that lends itself to the graphic presentation of structural reductionism. Its popularity arises from its pseudoscientific presentation, which is essentially mythical (pictorial) in character. The basic epistemological and ontological presumptions of general systems theory is revealed by its difficulties with metaphorical language (i.e., “boundary,” “goal-orientation,” “balance,” and “entropy”), a fundamental problem this essay attempts to avoid as much as possible.

3. Ironically, Millian pluralism, which also presupposes a frictionless and level playing field, is the goal of so-called postmodern deconstructive strategies—giving voice to the marginal case.

4. Capital Cities, which has less diversity than most of the twenty-three media conglomerates still exploits an impressive array of divestiture. For instance, Capital Cities owns the ABC television network, cable companies, Hollywood studios, ESPN and Lifetime cable channels, the country’s largest publisher of religious material, Fairchild publications which dominate several trades such as the garment business, and a newspaper chain. Warren Buffett, the largest single stockholder, also owns Berkshire Hathaway Company, is the second largest stockholder in the Washington Post Company, and has a significant 6 percent interest in Coca-Cola, owner of Columbia Pictures.

5. A famous case that illustrates the clash between profit and journalistic values is Fred Friendly’s resignation from the position of president of CBS News in 1966. The network refused to cancel a fifth rerun of an “I Love Lucy” episode so that a crucial Senate hearing about the Vietnam War could be given live coverage. Why? Friendly was told that a loss of revenue from a delayed airing of the “I Love Lucy” rerun was intolerable to shareholders. Friendly quit on the spot. Few individuals with Friendly’s status and income show such courage.

6. This information was brought to my attention by Ms. Richiko Ikeda.

7. This information was brought to my attention by Ms. Dianne Bystrom.

REFERENCES


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