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Media Ownership, Autonomy, and Democracy in a Corporate Age

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This chapter begins with two tales about media ownership, autonomy and democracy in a corporate age, one involving adding ideas/images to media content, the other involving subtracting ideas from content. The first draws from what Miles McNutt (2018) calls “The Disney Episode” of a particular kind of television sitcom. In the most recent examples of these episodes, the fictional families of *Modern Family* (in 2012), *The Middle* (two episodes in 2014), and *Black-ish* (2016) visit various Disney theme parks, with the plot and the setting centered on Disney. They become, in essence, a giant promotion for Disney, but in the guise of television entertainment. It is not an accident that these episodes from these particular sitcoms are set at Disney (rather than, say, Cedar Point, which would be more logical geographically for the Indiana-based Hecks of *The Middle*). All three programs aired on the Disney-owned ABC broadcast network, with the most recent, *Black-ish*, also co-produced by ABC Studios. McNutt observes that ABC’s “Disney Episodes” are perhaps in decline, not because Disney is now less willing to use its owned outlets, but rather because of the decline of the broadcast program as a marketing vehicle.

The second example involves the potential removal of news topics. In the online site of *The New York Post* in 2019, a report of an alleged sexual assault in the 1990s of writer Jean Carroll by Donald Trump disappeared. As CNN reported on June 25, “The Post’s story about Carroll’s sexual assault allegations was mysteriously scrubbed from the tabloid’s website on Friday afternoon” (Darcy and Garvey, 2019). The removal was purportedly dictated by Col Allen, a former editor and then-consultant of the paper, who also is a confidante of Rupert Murdoch, the CEO of News Corp, the owner of *The Post*. Murdoch is also a Donald Trump supporter, and News Corp. owns Fox News. In a similar fashion, it has been reported that a story about Donald Trump’s sexual affair with, and payoff of, Stormy Daniels was prepared at Fox News during the 2016 election, but was never aired. The reporter, Diana Falzone, told her colleagues that the head of FoxNews.com said to her about why the story was killed, “Good reporting, kiddo. But Rupert wants Donald Trump to win. So just let it go” (Mayer, 2019). The timing of such a story, and on an outlet like Fox News, may have had effects on the outcome of a very narrow 2016 election.

As the above examples highlight, ownership potentially affects the viewpoint, tone and agenda of both journalism (like a newspaper and cable broadcasting; see Proffitt, 2007a) and non-journalistic entertainment (situation comedies). Media creators may feel pressure to fit in with corporate agendas, either by promoting agenda items/worldviews or by not criticizing them.
Sometimes this pressure may be explicit—such as what seems to be the case in the News Corp. examples—and sometimes it may be more subtle or implicit: the most recent Disney episode examples were not necessarily mandated by the corporate owner, but rather “suggested” (quoted in McNutt, 2018).

Such characteristics of corporate media ownership have implications for the media’s role in democracy, for media-worker and media-user autonomy, for diversity, for policy, and for ethics—on a variety of levels. This chapter will discuss basic trends and implications of large media ownership in a corporate age by engaging much of the increasingly sizable literature on mega-media corporations. The first section will briefly review the nature of large-media ownership today, including reasons for why it has taken the form that it has. Following this, the chapter will explore concerns about how large corporate media ownership may undermine democracy and individual autonomy, with specific discussions of the dangers of standardization, corporate promotion and the influence of advertising. The chapter concludes by reflecting on ethical strategies for mitigating the influence of media ownership.

THE NATURE OF CORPORATE MEDIA OWNERSHIP

Concerns about who owns the media have existed since at least the adolescence of industrial-age media. Max Weber, one of the founders of sociology, argued in a 1910 speech about the need to be wary of the dangers of newspaper “trusts,” among other economic forces that affect media (Weber, 1910/1976). Although not analyses of specific media ownership patterns per se, the work of certain Frankfurt School theorists assumed monolithic ownership structures and foreshadowed modern criticisms of media ownership, such as standardization of content (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1948/2001). Concentration and conglomeratization of media became an object of study by journalistic and media studies scholars with the 1983 publication of The Media Monopoly by Ben H. Bagdikian and subsequent updates (such as Bagdikian, 2004). Robert McChesney is also a key scholar in foregrounding, from a critical media studies perspective, large media ownership (especially 2004, 2015). Other scholars have also looked critically at general media ownership patterns (e.g., Alger, 1998; Baker, 2007; Barnouw et al., 1997; Bettig and Hall, 2012; Croteau and Hoynes, 2006; Hesmondhalgh, 2019; Hardy, 2010, 2014; McAllister and Stoltzfus-Brown, 2019; Proffitt and Tewksbury, 2012; Schiller, 1989; Valcke, Sükösd, and Picard, 2015; in addition to the geographic- and medium-specific work discussed below).

Not all scholars believe media ownership is sufficiently concentrated to warrant concern. Compaine argues in one of his authored chapters in the often-cited work Who Owns the Media, that the number of “leading firms” in the media industries as increasing in the 2000s (Compaine & Gomery, 2000, ch. 8). In another work, he calls the idea of a media monopoly a “myth,” citing as evidence his own industry data and previous quantitative studies about ownership and content diversity/quality (Compaine, 2005).

However, Baker (2007) specifically answers Compaine’s claim of a plethora of media owners with several counter-arguments, including these four: (1) concentration may be more apparent if one considers media separately, rather than as one large entity that sums all companies regardless of medium; (2) media organizations may serve different, but essential functions in a given industry such as production, distribution and exhibition, and can therefore leverage industrial power through such ownership strategies as vertical and horizontal integration; (3) specific markets, especially in local areas, may belie what seems to be a more open market nationally in some circumstances; and (4) quantitative studies that correlate ownership with content are often problematic measures of ownership dangers, given the general philosophy of checks and
balances of ownership in democracy (more on this in a later section) and the difficulty of operationalizing and measuring nebulous concepts like “diversity.” About this latter point, Einstein has argued that her own quantitative data has been narrowly interpreted by pro-industry forces to justify self-interested deregulation policies (see her trade journal piece, Einstein, 2004, commenting on data found in, Einstein, 2003; see also Kunz, 2007, p. vii). Others have also argued that while smaller media producers still exist, they are increasingly intertwined with larger media firms, a partnership which offers some advantages, but also erodes the concept of “alternative” (Hesmondhalgh, 2019).

Other critics highlight concentration of ownership in different industries and different sectors in the same media industry, a direct link to the first three points noted above. The local monopoly enjoyed by many newspapers and their vertical integration of production, distribution and exhibition have historically given them an influence that exceeds the number of companies nationally, at least until the serious post-millennial financial problems in that industry. Vertical integration of production and distribution in both the motion picture and television industries exacerbate the influence that a few significant companies (WarnerMedia, Disney, Viacom, News Corp.) have over those industries (Kunz, 2007; Meehan, 2005; Wasko, 2003). For example, despite being called a “no show in the major segments of newspapers and broadcasting” by Compaine (Compaine and Gomery, 2000, p. 485)—perhaps because it does not solely own one of the Big Four U.S. television networks—Time Warner (now called WarnerMedia, owned by AT&T) nevertheless owns significant television program production companies with inroads into syndication. In the mid-2000s, “Never in the history of TV has one broadcast entity dominated programming like the CBS Television Distribution Group” (Berman, 2006, p. 38); the company resulted from a merger in 2006. In radio, iHeartCommunications, Inc. (formerly Clear Channel) owns more than twice as many U.S. radio stations—well over 800—as its number two competitor, and this after significant reduction over the years of its holdings. The recorded music industry is concentrated at many different levels, including production—via the “loose integration” (Burkart, 2005) with multi-media conglomerates of the Big Three music companies (Universal, Sony and Warner). The comic book industry features a near duopoly at the production level via Marvel and DC Comics, and near monopolistic conditions at both print distribution (to comic bookshops through a company called Diamond) and digital distribution (the cloud-based platform comiXology) (McAllister and MacAuley, Forthcoming). Scholars have argued that concentration of media ownership is also a problem in many other countries besides the United States (see for example Gutiérrez and Ocampo, 2019; Thomas and Nain, 2004; Winseck, 2019).

And although the number of media owners increases when one looks at the entire media system rather than players in individual industries, it is also true that several of the largest media conglomerates are cross-media owners, meaning that they are major forces in several media industries. As noted above, concentration of ownership in particular media industries has been a concern for several decades. However, McChesney (2015) contends that one difference between the past and the current situation is that in the past different companies controlled each medium: the broadcast networks in television, the “Majors” in film. But now often the same companies dominate in different industries. WarnerMedia, for example, is a significant or dominant player in film and television production; film distribution; cable television production and distribution; and comic-book production. Its corporate owner, AT&T, is also a major player in exhibition. The rate of various media acquisitions has arguably accelerated in the 2010s. Three of the largest media mergers in history have occurred in the three-year period from 2016–2019: AT&T’s purchase of Time Warner; Disney’s purchase of many of the entertainment assets of 21st Century Fox; and the Charter-Bright House-Warner Cable merger (Hayes, 2017).
At least four major factors have influenced the creation of modern media ownership. Although decried by some industry press accounts as out-of-date, the concept of “synergy” still guides many large media corporations as they look to maximize revenue and publicity by moving branded licenses through owned subsidiaries (Meehan, 1991, 2005). Newer forms of synergy may be more focused on reaching target markets through multiple means, such as Disney’s multi-media kids strategies using Disney-branded (and Fox-branded) films and videos, Radio Disney, The Disney Channel, Disney XD, Disney theme parks, Marvel Entertainment, and special programming on ESPN and ABC. The latter includes the previously mentioned “Disney Episodes” and specials such as The Lion King: Can You Feel The Love Tonight with Robin Roberts that aired ABC primetime in July 2019 and coincided with the release of the 2019 remake of The Lion King (for discussions of the political economy of Disney, see Budd and Kirsch, 2005; Wasko, 2001).

New media technologies and digitization have also encouraged media growth, as older analog-era corporations look to be “converged” economically/structurally to match predicted technological convergence, while newer digital-era corporations have developed a different strategy that still encourages acquisitions. In addition to websites based upon traditional media brands (cnn.com; espn.com), Time Warner’s acquisition by AOL in 2000, News Corp’s ownership of MySpace.com, Viacom’s purchase of IFILM and Neopets, Inc., and Disney’s grab of Club Penguin, a kids social networking site, are historical examples of big media’s eagerness to digitally converge (sometimes with financially disastrous results, as in the AOL and MySpace mergers).

More successful in the 2000s has been the growth of companies—especially Google and Facebook—who started in the digital era and have grown to dominate Internet and social-media revenues. Google’s parent company Alphabet owns Gmail, YouTube, Waze, Google Maps, Pixel Phone, Blogger, Google Photos, Google Ads, and Google Analytics, among many other subsidiaries. With Google, the goal is not the spread the same mediated content across different owned subsidiaries, but rather to gather user data—about email, video postings and viewings, locations, mobile phones, blogging, and photos—by providing seemingly “free” services that entice users to share data with the platforms, and then generate revenue through targeted advertising (a practice that the ownership of Google Ads and Google Analytics greatly facilitates). Facebook’s ownership of Instagram is a similar strategy. In terms of revenue dominance, Alphabet and Facebook were estimated to receive over 59 per cent of the total digital ad sales in the US in 2019 (Poggi, 2019). This bears repeating: that is two companies operating as a duopoly by controlling well over 50 per cent of all US digital advertising revenue. A rising competitor in the 2010s has been Amazon, which of course is not just an e-commerce site, but also an entertainment site offering both original and curated programming and movies; in this case, media and TV are watched within a web environment originally designed for selling and purchasing. Amazon is also a major player in “next internet” functions like cloud computing, and “The Internet of Things,” the latter designed to integrate different elements and spaces in our lives (kitchens, bedrooms) with both automatic shopping/purchasing, media forms (music and news) and data collection (patterns of specific purchases and consumption of music and news) (Mosco, 2018).

Globalization has also encouraged large media growth, as media empires peddle their own worldwide branded products such as Superman (WarnerMedia), Jurassic Park (Comcast), and Star Wars (Disney). Moreover, non-media global advertisers desire media corporations with large-scale distribution for global campaigns. This trend is encouraged not just by brands like McDonalds and Coca-Cola, but also by global advertising organizations such as Omnicom (see below), and thus facilitated by such media outlets as Comcast and its subsidiary Sky, which operate transnationally.

Finally, large media corporations have gotten bigger because they have been allowed to. Policies which favor privatization of media resources as well as the elimination of regulations,
such as the Financial Interest and Syndication Rules and caps on broadcast ownership, or the elimination of Net Neutrality regulations that favor large Internet Service Providers (ISPs) in the US, have both influenced growth and been influenced by growth through the lobbying and legal clout of big media (Proffitt, 2007b; Ramey, 2007).

It should also be noted that a factor accentuating the power of a few very large media corporations is the uniformity of structure that many of them share, as well as those in the lower tiers of influence. Baker (2007) argues that, in addition to a diversity of owners, a diversity of ownership structures—publicly traded corporations, non-profit corporations, non-stock corporations, government owned, sole proprietorships, partnerships, cooperatives—would be democratically healthy. But the corporate structure dominates. In fact, the publicly traded corporation may be especially problematic as an ownership structure for media. The profit expectation emphasized not just by dividend payments but by publicly known, changing and traded stock values and the scrutiny of quarterly earnings reports, places pressure on short-term growth and profit maximization, not just a reasonable return, all of which increase the salience of the below factors.

Also exacerbating the emphasis on profits are private equity firms which, since at least 2005, have been making bids for and buying up media corporations such as Clear Channel (now called iHeartCommunications but is owned by iHeartMedia) and MGM. Private equity firms are not held to the same regulations and standards as publicly held corporations, which results in a lack of transparency, undermining the ideal of the media as watchdog. While private equity firms tend to break up concentrated corporations, such as the case of Clear Channel selling off hundreds of its radio stations and its television station group, the goals of such firms are short-term and include quick returns on their investments, improved efficiencies (including cutting labor and wages), higher profit margins, and the tendency to within a few years sell the company or go public. Nowhere is this more evident than in the newspaper industry as investors such as Fortress Investment Group LLC (New Media Investment Group/GateHouse Media) and Alden Global Capital LLC (Digital First Media/MediaNews Group) have acquired not only large city newspapers, such as the Denver Post, The Columbus Dispatch, and the Boston Herald, but also hundreds of smaller and regional daily and weekly papers. The result has been devastating cuts to newsrooms as well as the potential for increased news deserts with the loss of additional local newspapers. For example, in May 2019, as it was in potential merger talks with Gannett (the owner of USA Today and more than 100 daily newspapers), GateHouse reportedly planned to consolidate 50 local papers it owned in Massachusetts into 18 regional newspapers (Borchers, 2019), and there have been reports of more than 200 layoffs across the company just in the first half of the year (Jones, 2019). Such incentives accentuate the tensions between the economic goals of media-as-businesses and the democratic goals of media-as-valued-communication resources, as discussed below.

**HOW OWNERSHIP MAY UNDERMINE DEMOCRACY**

Owners of media operations may exert influence over content and distribution in a variety of ways, including the allocation of particular resources over other possibilities; the hiring and firing of key personnel and the perceived work autonomy by these personnel; the general climate of the operation shaped through private and public statements; and even direct intervention in day-to-day operations, although this may be rare in large corporations.

Of course, in the larger system of the political economy of the media, media ownership is one of several systems that may affect the structure, availability and range of messages in the media. Other systems include the profit motive generally, different media funding systems (including
advertising), and content sources, such as public relations activities. Many of the criticisms below would also apply to these other economic pressures. As will be seen, some of the dangers concern how ownership trends partner with these additional pressures to create a less-than-ideal democratic system. The discussion of these dangers will begin with an umbrella explanation, and from there become more specific about media ownership influences.

UNDERMINING ASSURANCES OF DISTRIBUTIVE DEMOCRACY AND MORAL AUTONOMY

Baker (2007) posits that a sufficient argument for a diversity of ownership is the “Democratic Distribution Principle”: “a claim that democracy implies as wide as practical a dispersal of power within the public sphere” (p. 7). This principle helps to prevent controlling forces throughout the wider society, since, to use a Habermasian concept, the public sphere can influence political support, and, when abused by a few controlling forces (including media ownership), can undermine democracy. However, measures of content diversity in media, even if done without bias and with subtlety (rarely accomplished, in Baker’s view), are insufficient safeguards. Sometimes, a complete diversity of views and opinions will not be found in media/the public sphere, but this limited scope may not result from powerful, controlling forces, but instead may be legitimate if democracy, through authentic deliberation, has decided on the parameters of reasonable ideas. For example, most of us can agree that cable TV systems are under no democratic obligation to carry The Pro-Nazi Channel (although the Trump Era perhaps has eroded the universalism of this claim); content analyses that find no Nazi representation should not conclude a lack of democratic process as a reason for this exclusion.

This is complicated by the assurance of some degree of moral autonomy that democracy requires of citizens in evaluating the range of information as legitimate or manipulated. Christman (2018) offers a basic definition of autonomy as “to be one’s own person, to be directed by considerations, desires, conditions, and characteristics that are not simply imposed externally upon one, but are part of what can somehow be considered one’s authentic self,” including freedom from the manipulation of external forces. Autonomy can be consensus oriented, as an autonomous person may choose, upon reflection, to adapt the values of a larger social group, such as a community. Although admittedly an ideal, true moral autonomy requires not just the adoption of values true to oneself, but also “second-order” reflection/values that allow authentic awareness and (re-)evaluation of one’s values and desires (Christman, 2018).

If the public sphere and the wider culture are limited in terms of information, perspectives and even broader values, then this limitation may corrupt not just first-order values, but also second-order values; our ability to evaluate our value system. If we assume that the larger culture has the ability to enculturate/socialize members of that culture, from an ideological perspective this would lead to hegemony, where the key definitions of life and society—including our moral evaluation of ourselves and others—would be influenced by power structures in a society that also influence culture. Both our values, and our ability to evaluate our values, would be degraded in such a situation.

Combining then an unmeasurable democratically distributive range of ideas with the need for autonomous second-order reflection provides a justification for diverse media ownership. The influence of content by a media owner is not always obvious. If one may not know when the range of ideas in media may be the result of a democratic deliberation, or the result of limited (and therefore potentially limiting) media ownership, and if there is a danger of ideologically slanted or narcotizing media content undermining our ability to assess reflection of our own
values, then the dangers of media ownership need to be minimized as much as possible. The best way to ensure that media ownership does not negatively affect democratic distribution and moral autonomy is to expand the number and categories of owners.

But if media ownership can limit the range of ideas—or expand them in less-than-useful ways—how is this likely to occur, especially given the dominance of the profit-obsessed corporate structure? What specific content dangers have critics of concentrated media ownership raised? The next sections explore a few of these dangers: increased standardization and decreased localism; the emphasis on self-interested corporate promotion; and the increased leverage of advertising on corporate media ownership.

**EMPHASIZING STANDARDIZATION: DEEMPHASIZING LOCALISM**

Critics have argued that large media owners encourage standardized content across various holdings, both to exploit economies of scale and to develop consistent brand images (Croteau and Hoynes, 2006; McChesney, 2004). This clearly affects local communities, especially in its reduction of media content specifically for that community.

Localism has long been a fundamental aspect of broadcasting and its regulation (e.g., Napoli, 2001). As early as the 1920s, broadcasters were viewed as public trustees, a concept solidified in the Radio Act of 1927 and the allocation of broadcast licenses. Broadcasters were given free licenses (and a monopoly) with the agreement that they would serve the interests and needs of the community in which they were located, as the airwaves were considered public property rather than private property. Historically, the Federal Communications Commission (n.d.) has defined broadcast television and radio as “distinctly local media” and has enacted requirements to ensure the needs of the community are served. Indeed, broadcasting is crucial for local communities, as evidenced by the role of radio broadcasting to disseminate information about Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico in 2017 (Bell, 2018). Broadcasters have argued that economic realities, particularly competition from other media, suggest that multiple ownership and the financial efficiencies that accompany it are necessary in order for free over-the-air broadcasting to survive. With concentration of ownership, broadcasters are able to benefit from standardization and centralization of production, but localism requires decentralization (Proffitt, 2007b). As can be seen in radio since the Telecommunications Act of 1996 lifted national ownership caps, the promise of localism often takes a backseat to the benefits of economies of scale.

The rise of large broadcasting group owners such as iHeartMedia, which may format playlists and other “format radio” content from headquarters, has led to the systematic replacement of local programming by nationally distributed canned programming and news. Technology such as Voice Tracking has also allowed group owners to cut labor because the same disc jockeys can be heard across the United States. Syndicated national radio programming is also cheaper to produce and distribute among radio stations than it is to pay additional journalists. To reduce costs and increase revenue, Sinclair Broadcasting, one of the largest television groups, has historically cut local news from several of its stations, replacing news with syndicated entertainment programming. It has issued “must-carry” commentaries—often from a right-wing point of view—to its owned stations. A viral video of uniform language from different local station newscasters—all working for Sinclair-owned stations, all of them ironically parroting about “the
troubling trend of irresponsible, one sided news stories plaguing our country”—highlighted the dangers of standardized content and an amplified, monolithic perspective when one national company owns hundreds of local news outlets (Burke, 2018).

EMPHASIS ON PROMOTION AND MULTI-MEDIA REVENUE STREAMS

Large media corporations emphasize the promotion of their products to an outlandish degree. The average cost of marketing a major U.S. Hollywood film globally in 2014 was $200 million (McClintock, 2014). Comcast (owner of Universal) and Disney are among the largest advertisers in the world. Network television sacrifices millions in advertising revenue each year to air promotional spots for their own programs. Significant “below the line” marketing and promotional activity is added to traditional advertising spending. Both why they do this, and how they do this, speak to their characteristics as corporate media and the damage these characteristics may impose upon cultural vibrancy.

Why media corporations emphasize marketing includes such medium specific reasons as the importance of a big box office during opening weekend (film) and the increased competition among broadcast and cable networks (TV) (McAllister, 2000). But another reason has to do with the nature of promotion among synergy-oriented companies. Modern media conglomerates not only have multiple licenses to promote, but also multiple subsidiaries in which to promote them. This brings us to the “how” question, because media conglomerates do not just promote brands through advertising, but also through general promotional activities that fully exploit their media subsidiaries.

A major way this is done is through “plugola,” defined in this context as the appearance of one media brand in another media branded text owned by the same corporation, for promotional purposes (McAllister, 2002). If characters in one television program appear in another television program owned by the same production company, then this would be plugola. When actors from a Fox television program are shown in the audience of a televised sporting event with the announcers commenting, this also would be plugola.

One particularly disturbing characteristic is the use of journalism to promote corporate holdings. In this case, “fluff” news stories are created around a corporately owned media license. Certainly the emphasis on ratings and profit has increased big media’s tendency to cover celebrity and “lifestyle” over more issue-oriented news, but so has the number of brands the corporation wants to promote with corporately owned news. This is especially an issue when news operations are owned by larger conglomerates which are primarily entertainment oriented (such as Disney’s ownership of ABC News). Synergistic plugola news stories are common in corporate news, including dozens or even hundreds of stories about specific programs such as NBC’s Seinfeld (McAllister, 2002); plugola stories in local markets (Higgins and Sussman, 2007); and news stories about a sport (NASCAR), which had an incentive not just to plug the sport, and the broadcast of the sport on a particular network (such as NBC), but also to narratively construct a particular type of viewer-consumer (the “NASCAR dad”) for the sport (Vavrus, 2007). Cross-media connections may affect the news agenda throughout the world, including in South Korea (Lee, Baek, Pae, Jeong, and Jung, 2018) and Belgium (Panis, Van den Bulck, Verschraegen, van der Burg, and Paulussen, 2015). Such stories not only absorb valuable news time/space that could be devoted to other stories, but also typically infuse the story with a consumption orientation, in this case the desirability of consuming media brands.

Perhaps even more significant is the expansive nature of the mediated “text” in cross-media corporate ownership. Meehan (1991) argued that a media brand such as Batman could
be conceptualized as a “commodity inter-text,” in which the various manifestations of the brand—Batman in film, comics, TV, novelizations, video games, soundtracks, amusement park rides—become a giant self-referential promotion for the brand. Sandler (2003) contended that one reason animation has become such a cultural force is the corporate flexibility that this form offers for branding, merchandising and cross-media synergy. Meehan (2005) notes how a brand can be reused throughout a media empire in its original form through a variety of techniques she labels “recirculation” (such as syndication), “repackaging” (DVD versions), “reversioning” (Director’s Cuts), “recycling” (tribute specials/clip shows) and “redemption” (spin-off series). Proffitt, Tchoi, and McAllister (2007) observed that the promotional incentives in corporate texts were enhanced in The Matrix franchise, as the various licensed texts created an “intertextual flow” in which a grand, linked narrative was touted: to not buy the video game or promotional DVD meant that fans missed a piece of the plot or character development. Such expansive corporate texts push off the cultural agenda other potential aesthetic or political offerings.

Many works have also noted how the movement of texts through different media outlets may ultimately dilute potentially resistant or counter-hegemonic messages in the text. In terms of fantasy characters, for example, scholars have pointed to the textual “sanitization” of Batman in Warner Brothers films in the 1990s (Terrill, 2000) and of X-Men’s Wolverine in Fox films (Johnson, 2007), the downplaying of class issues in the translation of Harry Potter from books to film (Waetjen and Gibson, 2007), and the removal of some of the most subversive elements in Powerpuff Girls merchandise when compared to the original cartoons (Van Fuqua, 2003).

**VULNERABILITY TO BIG ADVERTISING**

Despite the title, the first six editions of Bagdikian’s *Media Monopoly* explored two dangers of modern media empires, not just one: ownership influence (the monopoly part) and advertiser influence. One chapter explicitly dealt with the interaction between the two: Chapter 7, simply titled “Monopoly” (regrettably, this chapter was absent from the 2004 edition). Among his arguments is that large-scale advertising encourages large-media growth, as mega-media organizations can offer more cost efficiencies and conveniences to advertisers and thus exploit a competitive advantage compared to smaller firms. Smaller media firms, then, are less attractive to large-scale advertisers and have a tougher time surviving. In addition, advertising wants to reach as many consumers as possible (even when targeting relatively narrow demographics), thereby increasing uniformity across media holdings, as advertisers look for media content that is non-controversial, non-threatening and consumption-oriented. One study found that Advertising Directors at chain newspapers were more likely to report the intrusion of advertising influences upon news content than non-chain papers (An and Bergen, 2007).

Besides encouraging growth and uniformity, advertising may also be especially influential with large media owners. As corporate media look to sell their own brands and break out of the “clutter,” they often partner with product advertisers to develop cross-promotional campaigns to increase publicity: to make sure the promotional volume, in the words of *This is Spinal Tap*, “Goes to 11.” In traditional media, such cross-promotional deals come with a price, often in the form of product placement (product appears in a media text), the more intrusive product integration (product becomes central to a media text), and other forms of advertising’s appropriation of media symbols (McAllister, 2000). With digital media, these forms can include native advertising and content marketing (Einstein, 2016). Big advertising, then, can further emphasize the promotional thrust of large-media corporations.
The global nature of media corporations and advertising organizations also has increased the power of advertising over media. Although consumers know the names of large-media corporations and large advertisers, much less known are large-scale advertising agencies and companies that own these agencies. In fact, ownership concentration is not just a concern with media companies, but also with advertising agencies. The top three global advertising organizations (WPP Group, Omnicom, Publicis) generated more than $45 billion in 2017 revenue (Ad Age, 2018). These global advertising/marketing organizations own several global agencies that, among other activities, directly engage in buying advertising time/space from media companies. Since, when dealing the global media corporations, a global advertising agency such as BBDO does not just represent one client, but several clients, and does not even just represent its own clients, but potentially all of the clients of its corporate owner (in this case, Omnicom) representing literally billions of dollars in billings, this gives corporately owned agencies a tremendous amount of clout with media corporations.

A last advertising-oriented consideration of ownership is that the more advertising-funded subsidiaries that a multi-media corporation has, the more vulnerable that corporation becomes to advertising-induced pressure, even when non-advertising subsidiaries are involved (Baker, 2007). Thus, if an advertiser is satirized in an HBO movie, the advertiser may retaliate by threatening to withdraw advertising from WarnerMedia’s other cable television networks. Even more generally, pressure groups may boycott advertisers of a corporation’s holdings if they object to media content in any subsidiary of that corporation. If at all successful, such boycotts reinforce advertising’s influence over media content—in this case even media content not directly supported by advertising, but nevertheless connected to a cross-media owner.

ETHICS AND MEDIA OWNERSHIP IN A CORPORATE AGE

The issue of corporate media ownership and its effects upon content and culture is ultimately a structural issue. As such, this issue is addressed, at best, by changes in the incentives of the larger economic system or, second best, by the implementation of policies about media structure that mitigate the destructive growth and character of media owners and its effect upon culture and democracy (such policy recommendations are offered by Baker, 2007; Ramey, 2007; chapters in Valcke, Sükösd, and Picard, 2015; among others). But ethical considerations can play a role in sparking such legislation and larger changes, and in negotiating through the current media landscape until such changes occur.

Government legislators can embrace democratic principles both in terms of what policies are best to maintain democratic vibrancy (including ownership policies), and what democratic process is best to decide on such polices (keeping powerful media lobbies at bay). The earlier section on democratic distribution and moral autonomy argued that the desire for diverse ownership is a democratic investment that can help philosophically ensure a vibrant system. As such, Baker (2007) and others note that concern about media ownership is not a clear-cut “right versus left” political issue, and as such bi-partisan pressure may help keep politicians on target. In addition, citizens groups such as Free Press (www.freepress.org) can help focus policy makers on their ethical and democratic obligations.

Media owners, in turn, can maintain an ethical stance in distinguishing between maximized profits and reasonable profits, especially as the drive to maximize profits may lead to many if not most of the typical dangers of large corporate media ownership (standardization, promotion, advertising influence, etc.). Owners should, in other words, embrace a “Public Sphere” model of media in addition to a “Market” model (Croteau and Hoynes, 2006). Again, the corporate
structure is more likely to reward maximization versus reasonableness, but perhaps media-specific policies that create democratic incentives—and disincentives—for owners and create more diversity in ownership structures can help remind media owners that, because they are in the media, they have other socio-cultural obligations to fulfill besides those to the shareholders.

Media workers, when working in a larger corporate context, may feel concerned about the effects of this context upon their job and the conflicts this context can create with their journalistic, aesthetic and ideological standards (Turow, 1994). Worker empowerment strategies such as unionization may also balance out the decline in autonomy due to large corporate ownership (Proffitt, 2019), in addition to an increase in employee- or community-owned outlets. When teaching classes to future media workers that address issues of owner and advertiser influences, frequently students will wonder how they may negotiate such structures with their own values. One way is to look for contradictions in this complex system that can allow for creative autonomy (Hesmondhalgh, 2019), and exploit those contradictions when they are presented.

Media studies scholars and teachers can be active in raising issues of media ownership. The implementation of media literacy programs in K-12 schools that teach kids from an early age not only how to watch or read media products critically and examine who owns the media, but also create their own media content, are essential in enhancing autonomy with media. Groups such as Media Literacy Now are advocating for legislation that would ensure that students learn the media literacy skills necessary to be active citizens and ethical consumers. Several states, including Washington, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and New Mexico, have passed legislation related to media literacy in schools. And outreach such as PBS NewsHour Reporting Labs and community-based initiatives advocated and supported by low-power FM stations and other grassroots organizations teach kids and adults how to create ethical and creative media content in alternative ownership structures. Additionally, besides scholars’ roles in classroom and outreach issues involving ownership, Napoli and Gillis (2006) argued that government policy-makers may be increasingly open to communications scholars, not just economists, as resources for decision making.

Finally, with critical media literacy skills, media users/citizens can apply personal ethics by both keeping informed of how media ownership may influence the media choices they have (who owns whom, for example), supporting alternative forms and funding of media, and letting their governmental representatives know when they believe media policies should be changed or enforced. Citizens who believe they are most informed about media ownership also tend to be more troubled by media ownership trends and policies (cited in Baker, 2007). The ethics of using media in an age of corporate ownership involves not just being informed, but being informed about that particular issue and mindful of opportunities to contribute as active media citizens.

NOTE

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REFERENCES


