

What would happen if while walking down the street, you saw the New York Times building being emptied. Workers carried desks and computers to trucks that sped off. The next morning, the New York Times appears on the stands without a reference to yesterday's events. No other news source offers any insight. Would you investigate this further or take the facts at face value? The New York Times exists and must be the same newspaper you have read every morning prior. Written in the 1973, Allen Drury's novel *Come Nineveh, Come Tyre* showed how the Soviet Union took over the United States without shooting one bullet - they took over our media.

This dystopia can only become a reality when a single ideology controls the media that is meant to inform the public. Though the Soviet Union is no longer the threat, recent changes in media regulation have allowed information outlets to be controlled by fewer and fewer individuals, meaning the public receive less variety in opinions and news. Think about major companies like News Corp., Disney, Time Warner, Viacom, and General Electric deciding what news you see and hear about. Think about Clear Channel reaching 110 million listeners each week, over a third of the country. Without diversity in the media, diversity cannot be presented. News outlets continue to vie for viewers and profits by catering to what they perceive the public wants or should see instead of what the public needs to see. In this essay, I will outline the history of media deregulation and how public interest has been sacrificed because of media conglomerates care for personal politics and profits.

## THE HISTORY

## **MEDIA DEREGULATION AND RESULTS**

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Beginning in 1941, the government began media regulation by limiting the amount of television stations a company could own. Broadcasters could not control television stations that reached over 35% of households. Subsequent regulation limited cross-ownership of mediums, meaning companies could not own newspapers, radio stations, and television stations in the same market. The theory behind media regulation was to allow a diversity of voices and opinions to inform the general public. If one newspaper in a town did not like their mayor, another paper could present the favorable perspective thus creating a balance in the debate.

The Reagan Administration started a major campaign to deregulate the media. Throughout the sixties and seventies, conservatives blamed the media for having a liberal bias that coerced public opinion against segregation, the Vietnam War, and President Nixon. Former Treasury Secretary William Simon, along with major conservative organizations, began building a conservative media empire during this time. Reagan expanded the number of television stations a single entity could own from seven to twelve. Also, he lengthened the broadcast licenses from three to five years. Guidelines for the amount of non-entertainment programming was abolished along with regulations of the amount of advertising allowed per hour.

The most damaging alteration to media regulation came when the Federal Communications Commission abolished the "Fairness Doctrine." The Fairness Doctrine appeared in the early 1940's stating that station licenses were public trustees and were responsible to provide balanced opinions on controversial issues. Further, the Fairness Doctrine said stations had to search for issues of importance to the community and report on them. A 1969 Supreme Court case ruled in favor of the Fairness Doctrine when Red

Lion Co. aired a program attacking author Fred J. Cook. Cook asked to appear on the Red Lion's programming, but was refused. The FCC, on Cook's behalf, appealed the case to the Supreme Court.

Regardless of the court's ruling, many journalists felt the Fairness Doctrine violated their freedom of speech and that they should decide what constituted balanced reporting. Some journalists stopped reporting controversial issues in order to avoid the Doctrine. To help, Reagan appointed Mark Fowler to head the FCC, a major opponent of the Fairness Doctrine. In 1985, Fowler said the Fairness Doctrine was not having the desired effect. A 1987 court case, *Meredith Corp. v. FCC*, ruled that Congress had not mandate the Fairness Doctrine and thus the FCC did not have to enforce the rule. Congress passed its own version of the Doctrine only to have it vetoed by Reagan. By August, the Fairness Doctrine no longer existed.

The next milestone came from the 1996 Telecommunications Act, signed by President Clinton. Earlier versions of the bill called for broader deregulation in television and newspapers, but the compromise led to complete deregulation of the radio industry. Clear Channel owned 40 radio stations before the Act. Clear Channel now owns over 1,200 radio stations. Their closest competitor, Infinity Broadcasting Corp. owns 185, most of which are in major markets. Infinity is owned by Viacom Inc., owners of CBS, UPN and MTV.

The FCC has spent the past two years pushing further deregulation. This debate has happened under the radar of mainstream news for one, obvious reason - the mainstream media wants further deregulation. In 2003, General Electric (owner of NBC), Viacom (owner of CBS, UPN, and MTV), and News Corporation's Fox

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Entertainment Group requested that the FCC abolish all rules for regulation stating that Americans have an unprecedented number of sources for information that did not exist when the regulations were creating, including cable, the internet, and home video. Media companies complain they are losing viewers to these sources. Though these sources do exist, deregulation has made sure that most of the lost viewers of networks are found on cable channels and internet sites the network owns. Ninety percent of the top fifty cable television channels are owned by the major media networks that are losing viewers *to their own stations!* The top twenty internet news sites are also owned by these media corporations. So where is the variety?

### **THE RESULT**

The result of deregulation has caused the media to care mainly about money, ignore local communities, and dismantle variety. Ted Turner, a media mogul on par with Rupert Murdoch who sold Turner Communications to Time Warner, is himself against the media deregulation that continues - and it made him rich! In the July/August 2004 issue of Washington Monthly, Turner wrote an editorial about how new media entrepreneurs have no chance in this severely consolidated market. He outlined the benefits of small businesses and competition.

In the media, as in any industry, big corporations play a vital role, but so do small, emerging ones. When you lose small businesses, you lose big ideas. People who own their own businesses are their own bosses. They are independent thinkers. They know they can't compete by imitating the big guys--they have to innovate, so they're less obsessed with earnings than they are with ideas. They are quicker to seize on new technologies and new product ideas. They steal market share from the big companies, spurring them to adopt new approaches. This process promotes competition, which leads to higher product and service quality, more jobs, and greater wealth. It's called capitalism (Turner).

Media consolidation has done away with this. Money counts for everything, whether for the profits for the network, the parent company, or the shareholders. A Pew Research Center study conducted in early 2003 found that 72% of Americans had not heard of the recent FCC rule changes. Likely, the networks did not want to air a possibly controversial story when they had a specific interest in the outcome. After Disney purchased ABC, ABC's 20/20 scrapped a story critical of the Mouse House. NBC Sports apologized for Bob Costas' comments about China's "problems with human rights." NBC parent company GE does huge business with China.

As part of the craving for higher profits, local programming is becoming less common. A five year study conducted by the Project for Excellence in Journalism found that major media companies produce more nationally syndicated news stories in place of local coverage. This can have damaging affects. For example, police contacted local radio stations in Minot, N.D. about a freight train that derailed, releasing a cloud of anhydrous ammonia. Six of the stations in the town were owned by Clear Channel Communications, though police could not reach anyone for an hour. Three hundred people were hospitalized by the next day, in addition to dead livestock and pets. Clear Channel continued with its regularly scheduled programming - from San Antonio, Texas.

Any question of variety can be denounced by the swarm of cheap yet popular "reality shows" covering the airwaves. These shows create the instant profit that networks demand without the risk. Corporations have gotten into the habit of buying the creations of already successful risk-takers. To put in perspective the declining variety in voices, look back to 1990, when media corporations CBS, NBC, ABC, and Fox owned 12.5% of all new series aired, whether fully or partially. That number increased to 56.3%

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in 2000 and surged to 77.5% in 2002. Do four companies have a chance of reflecting the voices and tastes of 228 million Americans?

Further, media consolidation can mean less programming. This works for entertainment shows (NBC aired reruns of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* on its network after the show became a hit on their sister cable channel, Bravo, also owned by GE). This also works for news channels. Viacom purchased two news stations in Los Angeles and then merged them. The *American Journalism Review* reported “field reporters began carrying microphones labeled KCBS on one side and KCAL on the other.”

Media consolidation will remain a problem until public demand calls for change. According to a Pew Research Center report released in January 2004, 67% of Americans “prefer to get news from sources that have no particular political point of view.” Nevertheless, political commentary, analysis, and debate seem to dominate the dozens of news shows replacing straight, fair, fact-based news meant to inform the public. Instead, the public continues to be ill-informed and alienated from the media. Unfortunately, the checks and balances that once made the media a diverse and rich product have disappeared. The FCC continues to fight for further deregulation, as does the Bush Administration and Republicans in Congress. The media companies themselves promote their cause to build more profits and likely more influence. Justice Hugo Black, wrote in a 1945 landmark ruling on media-ownership “The First Amendment rests on the assumption that the widest possible dissemination of information from diverse and antagonistic sources is essential to the welfare of the public.” Democracy relies on an honest and active media to check and balance our government. But like the dystopia of

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Communists taking over our country by taking over our media, media conglomerates are making similar plans. And what do you do when you don't even know you've been conquered?