10 The Challenges of Public Functions and Commercialized Media

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We expect a great deal of media companies. We expect them to inform us about our communities, the nation, and the world. We expect them to serve public interests by creating the means for the aspirations and concerns of citizens to be conveyed and acted upon in society. We expect them to self-finance their operations through commercial activities. We expect them to behave without self-interest. We expect them not to disappoint us. They often do.

The roots of that disappointment can be found in ourselves and an all-too-often uncritical belief that that the market system will produce the media products and services society wants and needs. This belief emanates from a general satisfaction with competitive markets for other goods and services and from the underlying conviction that too much government involvement in society—especially in the media—is undesirable and harmful.

This environment creates significant challenges in producing public benefits from media because markets are not necessarily free or fair, and they cannot produce beneficial outcomes for all individuals. Moreover, media are not like other products. In our ideal notion of media, they perform many tasks necessary for the functioning of mass society: they convey and create culture and norms of society; they help us define and create our individual, professional, community, and national identities; they apprise us of events and developments of significance; and they link us to our political representatives and monitor their performance. These public functions of media support social cohesiveness, democratic activities, and public education. They also create tensions between the desire to ensure that media actually do serve these functions and the belief in private media and limitations on government ability to require less self-interested behaviors from media companies.

Those tensions combine with the competitive and commercialized nature of media markets to create an environment in which it is difficult for media to fulfill expectations of public service. These include: providing a wide range of information, opinions, and perspectives on developments that affect the lives of citizens; mobilizing members of the public to participate in and carry out their responsibilities in society; helping citizens identify with and participate in the lives of their community, their state, and the nation; serving the needs and representing the interests of widely differing social groups; and ensuring that government, economic, or social constraints do not narrow information and ideas.

The conflict between public functions and private media creates a paradox because commercially funded media cannot pursue economic self-interests without harming their public service roles.[1] Because market-based media face levels of competition never before experienced and their markets are more unstable than in the past century, and because they operate in a system in which the primary driver is self-interest and heavy commercialization of content, the movement away from serving public functions is clearly evident and is breeding discontent among social observers and citizens. Understanding that conflict and finding appropriate ways to respond are crucial if society is to deal with the paradox of public functions and commercialized media content.

Market Changes Drive Media Behavior

The history of market-based media reveals a strong relationship between market stability and media behavior. When conditions are stable and companies are financially secure, they tend to exhibit more willingness to attend to public functions than when conditions are turbulent and their financial performance is poor.

The sensationalism and lurid behavior of the penny press at the end of the nineteenth century, for example, was driven by an industry financially dependent upon circulation income and vigorous competition among papers to attract readers. That dependence increased until the 1920s when extreme levels of cutthroat competition led to the kind of chaotic and unprincipled media behavior immortalized in Ben Hecht and Charles McArthur's 1931 play *The Front Page.* The market ultimately produced a shakeout in competitors, which—combined with the need to advertise finished consumer goods—improved the financial situations of publishers and helped settle the market; it also supported the development of professionalism in journalism and newspapers. During the second half of the twentieth century, the rise of branded consumer goods tripled advertising income (in real terms) for publishers making them less dependent upon circulation income and more willing to invest resources in news coverage.[2]

Television news and public affairs coverage operated in a unique situation when it developed in the 1950s and 1960s because network news was not part of the *business* of television. Large amounts of money were being made from entertainment, and the time devoted to pursuing public functions was considered a cost of broadcasting and a loss leader. Ultimately, developments in communications technologies altered how news was gathered and broadcast, leading the networks to expand their broadcasts and lure large audiences from news in print. By the 1970s advertisers were finding the network evening news broadcasts highly attractive, and the news became financially beneficial to the networks. The success of network news served as a template for local stations, which expanded their news operations significantly, duplicating the financial benefits that had accrued to networks. At leading local stations, news broadcasts became the largest source of revenue.

The increasing competition between network and local news, between local stations, and between broadcast and cable channels that developed in the late 1980s and early 1990s reduced the profitability of all television news operations, creating instability, heavy commercialization of content, and movement away from serious public affairs content. The stresses of the television environment were explored in Sydney Lumet's 1976 film *Network,* which explored the impact of ratings on news and news personnel, a problem that journalists and social observers have explored.[3]

Today, the media environment for print and television news is characterized by even more market complexity and market turbulence than before.[4] Market complexity results from the greater amount of effort and difficulty media companies face operating in the environment, and turbulence results from the instability and the lack of clear direction in media markets that is creating uncertainty and business risks. Because their survival is at stake, media companies respond by placing greater emphases on their self-interests than on the public interests.

Five trends drive the pressures the media experience: media abundance, audience fragmentation and polarization, product portfolio development, the eroding strength of media companies, and a power shift in the communications process.

Abundance is seen in the dramatic rise in media types and units of media. The growth of media supply is far exceeding the growth of consumption in terms of both time and money. The average number of pages in newspapers tripled in the twentieth century; the number of over-the-air television channels has quadrupled since the 1960s—supplemented by an average of about fifty-six cable channels in the average home. In addition, there are four times as many magazines available as in 1970s, and newly created and stored information is growing at a rate of 30 percent a year. We used to think of competition among newspapers or competition among television channels, but this media abundance has fostered competition not only among media but also between media and other leisure time activities such as sports, concerts, and socializing at cafés and bars.

The abundance has created fragmentation and polarization of the audience because people are spreading their media use across more channels and titles (newspapers, magazines, and Web sites).[5] The plethora of choices produces extremes of use and nonuse among available channels and titles. In television, for example, individuals tend to focus most use on three or four channels. Increasing channel availability does not create an equal amount of channel use. For example, if twenty channels are received in a household, the average viewed is five. When fifty channels are received, the average rises to twelve, and if one hundred channels are received, the average viewed by all members of the household is only sixteen.[6] Advertisers understand this development and have responded by spreading their expenditures and paying less for smaller audiences. The audience-use changes mean that competition is no longer institutionally and structurally defined but is being defined by the time and money audiences/consumers spend with media, and the competitive focus is now on the attention economy and the experience economy.

The difficulties faced by individual units of media have led the parent companies to create and operate portfolios of media products.[7] This response occurs because declining average return per unit makes owning a single media product problematic. The portfolios are efforts to reduce risk and obtain economies of scale and scope. These portfolios can increase return if they involve efficient operations and joint cost savings.

Despite the growth of portfolios and large media companies, their strength is eroding. Today media companies rarely are in the top one hundred companies in the United States or in the top five hundred worldwide. Moreover, the reach of these companies is declining, even though they have grown bigger. Each has less of the viewers', readers', and listeners' attention than in the past, and their difficult strategic position concerns many investors. As a result, media companies are struggling with their major investors, and all major media companies fear they may become takeover targets.

Underscoring all of these problems is a fundamental power shift in communications. The media space was previously controlled by media companies; today, however, consumers are gaining control of what has become a demand market. This shift is apparent in the financing of contemporary initiatives in cable and satellite, TV and radio, audio and video downloading, digital television, and mobile media, which is based on a consumer payment model. Today, for every dollar spent on media by advertisers, consumers spend three.[8] Advertisers are cutting back on traditional types of advertising—already only about one-third of their total marketing expenditures—and spending their money on personal marketing, direct marketing, sponsorships, and cross-promotion.

The result is that media today experience commercial pressures that are reducing their willingness to invest significantly in news and public affairs content and that they commercialize the content they provide to an extent that—although it attracts some audience—it only marginally serves public functions. News and public affairs choices and presentations are affected by an emphasis on their entertainment value rather than their value as information and for provoking thought. News focuses on conflict, accidents, deviance, and celebrity, often presented in a sensational and salacious manner. Much public affairs programming has degenerated into forums for sound bites and polarized attacks on participants with other views.

Commercial Media and Concentration

Media companies tend to face less direct competition than other types of businesses, and despite complaints of concentration,[9] U.S. media are far less concentrated than media industries in Europe[10] and other parts of the world. Nevertheless, many observers are concerned about the growth of media company portfolios by their increased ownership of multiple titles and channels and their operations of multiple types of media in individual communities. The trend toward concentration has led to calls for greater regulation of ownership.

It needs to be recognized, however, that the U.S. government's ability to regulate concentration and media ownership differs between print media and electronic media. The U.S. Constitution limits government regulation of print media, and only laws and regulations that apply to all businesses or individuals are permitted. The government may not make special laws regarding print media ownership and concentration.

The government, however, has the ability to create specific laws and policies for electronic media, and to apply other laws and regulations that apply to all businesses or individuals. It has done so to varying degrees since it began regulating broadcasting at the beginning of the twentieth century. Since the 1980s significant policy shifts have occurred in electronic and telecommunication regulation, and they have affected concentration and commercialization.

Congress and regulatory agencies, most notably the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), are responsible for creating national communications policies. When conflicts arise between Congress and regulatory agencies, or someone alleges that the policies or developments in the industries violate other laws or the Constitution, courts make decisions regarding the conflicts and charges.

The history of the development of telecommunications and electronic media in the United States differs from that in other Western nations in that U.S. media have been commercial since their inception. Because of geographic and demographic distribution factors and the absence of a strong federal government with significant taxing ability during the early development of modern media and their regulation, government policy typically allowed private monopolies or oligopolies in telecommunications and broadcasting as a means of encouraging investment.

As a result, economic concentration and—in some cases—concentration of ownership was evident in these industries from the start. Since the 1980s, however, the government, with the backing of both major political parties, began efforts to reduce the power of that concentration and introduce more competition. In the process, the old monopolies in telecommunications were ended, and the government began to alter its regulation of broadcasting and cable services.

Four principles traditionally guided the regulation of electronic media: (1) protecting military and intelligence interests in electronic communications; (2) protecting the financial investments of existing companies; (3) locating media in as many cities as possible; and (4) increasing the media units in each market to the extent that existing companies' survival was not threatened.

The first principle stemmed from the development of broadcast communication for naval use and its initial regulation in the United States by naval authorities. The second principle stemmed from the lobbying by early communication companies to gain regulation that reduced risk in investing in radio and then television. The third principle emerged from the desire to create localism in electronic media to ensure that local as well as national interests were served. The final principle was based in the belief that competition was good for both the economic market and the market for ideas.

These principles stood as the foundation of electronic communication regulation for most of the twentieth century, but since the 1980s they have undergone significant change as the approach to regulation changed. Today, four contemporary principles are apparent: protecting military and intelligence interests in electronic communications; increasing competition among existing companies; allowing the market to determine where and what services are provided; and allowing the market to determine the number of media units available in each market.

When the lists of traditional and contemporary principles of regulation are compared, what becomes immediately evident are the greater reliance on the market to make choices and the rejection of government as the arbitrator of what services should be provided in which locations. The policy changes significantly loosened government control and protectionism of existing companies and helped spur the rise in media outlets, which in turn has produced not only lower concentration levels than in the past but also competition previously unknown in the industries.

Those developments led to perhaps the most sweeping policy changes in the industry. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 permits local telephone companies to provide long distance service when they face competition in the local market and permits long distance companies to enter the local market at that time; permits phone companies to offer video services but not buy cable systems in their markets; permits cable companies to provide local phone services; permits broadcasters to own TV stations that reach 35 percent of all viewers (up from 25 percent); permits a party to own no more than five radio stations in a market of fourteen or fewer stations, or eight in a market of forty-five or more stations; and provides that local TV-newspaper-cable system cross-ownership prohibitions may be reviewed on a case-by-case basis.[11]

The Telecommunications Act was primarily intended to introduce more competition into telephone and cable services and to rationalize a great deal of separate regulation that had been the responsibility of several different regulatory agencies, Congress, and the courts. One result, however, is that the law has allowed some mergers and acquisitions not previously permitted. It was believed that the increased concentration would be fully offset by increased competition, but developments since 1996 have not borne out that prediction.

Although the trends in policy and the Telecommunications Act are to remove government control, they do not exempt mergers and acquisitions from antitrust concerns. Because the size of many mergers and acquisitions in the communications industries in the United States today meet the threshold requiring scrutiny, they are subject to review by government antitrust authorities. If regulators believe laws are violated, they can force rescission of the sale or merger or require actions to eliminate the antitrust concerns. Stringent enforcement of antitrust measures in the media and communication markets has not been observed since the late 1990s, however.

One of the most serious problems related to the regulation of large media companies and their concentration results from the subtle erosion and alteration of public policies and interests and a shift toward the purposes, convenience, and interests of the conglomerates. This is not to say that the media companies have always been happy with regulations promulgated, but that in the long term regulators have been generally more supportive of industry interests than public interests. This development should not be surprising because regulation of electronic media industries was spawned by major companies such as RCA and Westinghouse at the beginning of the twentieth century, when they sought protections for their investments. Since that time, most regulation has been strongly influenced by and supportive of the interests of those regulated.

It must be noted, however, that communications businesses do not share a monolithic approach to regulation; nor do all the businesses and their media share the same interests simultaneously. Because of differences in their structures and properties, they sometimes diverge in terms of what policies are important. This is true for every type of industry, and, as Doris Graber points out, "a conglomerate heavily involved in export industries will not share the same view of tariffs as a conglomerate invested primarily in domestic manufacturing. Even within conglomerates, the interests of various components may clash."[12] Because leading communications companies have separate divisions for print, electronic, and recorded media, and their economic and public policy interests often differ dramatically, there can be and are conflicts within companies. These divisions are exacerbated even further when a company owns communications and noncommunications properties.

Even when such differences exist, corporate management will attempt to use and co-opt public policies in ways that provide the best overall situation for the company. Part of the success of industry in co-opting much regulation has been the result of well-funded industry associations and lobbyists and legions of communications company attorneys taking part in legislative and regulatory processes and hearings, while broader social concerns have been represented by small, underfunded public interest groups and only a few active legislators and regulators.

One of the continuing targets of communication companies and industry organizations has been regulations aimed at halting or controlling concentration or its effects. After successes by the broadcast, cable, and telecommunications industries in loosening regulations in the Telecommunications Act of 1996, the Newspaper Association of America, which represents the interests of large media companies and newspapers, began urging the FCC to repeal newspaper-broadcast cross-ownership regulations, which prohibited simultaneous ownership of newspapers and broadcast stations in the same market, calling them "anachronistic" because of growing competition in media.

In 2003 the FCC under the Bush administration promulgated regulations that liberalized ownership rules, loosening controls on the number of broadcast stations permitted to a single owner and cross-ownership rules. The move created a public and congressional protest, and a federal appeals court blocked the rules on grounds that they had not been adequately justified. The commission in 2006 reopened its consideration of the rules, and opponents have begun a vigorous campaign to block changes.[13]

The problems evident in the United States are compounded when media companies operate in more than one country. As these businesses become global in their operations, conflicts over content may occur as they enter markets with different cultures, political structures, and regulations. To accomplish their goals, media businesses develop contacts and friendships with political figures in nations where they do business or wish to do business in hopes of currying favor and beneficial policies. When conflicts occur, some companies are willing to behave amorally or immorally to ensure that their relationships and interests are protected.

Although European Union and domestic European laws that require a majority of local production have provoked angry outcries from U.S. motion picture, television, and cable industries, U.S. companies have altered their operations to gain access to those markets. NBC, for example, began local content production for news and public affairs programming to meet the European content requirements when it purchased SuperChannel and gained access to much of the wealthy European market.[14] The Disney Channel, which wanted to enter the attractive French market, gave up its objections to the laws by agreeing to produce 40 percent French content when it began distribution in that country in 1997.

These developments show that large companies can be persuaded to follow rules they dislike if regulators are willing to establish and enforce content and other regulations but leave economic incentives in place. Nevertheless, the ability to fashion workable policies to halt media consolidation and preserve media that provide pluralism and diverse voices even in Europe has been limited by internal disagreements and antiregulatory forces and by barriers to entry that have made it difficult for new entrants in newspaper markets.[15]

Effects of a Commercial Media System

Just as state-owned media encompass and convey the interests of the state, privately owned media are built upon and disseminate the interests of their owners and the media themselves. Setting aside egregious examples of self-interest for the moment, it is clear that the content of privately owned media nearly universally and continually convey probusiness, antiregulatory biases. Given that such media in developed societies operate in capitalist environments that are promoting laissez-faire capitalism or capitalism with only minor constraints, the private enterprise–oriented biases of media operated by communications companies can hardly be unexpected.

When it comes to general political and social issues, biases favoring lower unemployment, lower taxes, and crime control are generally evident in private media, as they are in developed societies as a whole. On most issues commercial media—which usually try not to unduly antagonize their audiences or advertisers—typically avoid being seen as highly supportive of one policy or another. They tend to be centrist and amoral in their coverage and portrayals, but often show progressive biases favoring clean environment, individual freedom, justice, and the like.

Portrayals and coverage by media companies are often convoluted when it comes to issues involving workers. Although they have a progressive bias toward good working conditions, reasonable salaries and benefits, and workers' rights, self-interests come into play when they face issues of employment and benefit costs and union activity. They often have an antiunion bias in coverage and are suspicious of government policies regarding salaries, benefits, and working conditions.

Among the main problems associated with concentration and commercialization are the use of media for the political purposes of their corporate owners, the homogenization of news and emphasis placed on mainstream voices, cross-promotion of communication products and services, and the increasing reliance on celebrity even in news and public affairs. It is also recognized that media companies use their communication to favor and support their individual political interests. Because the media have spent a great deal of effort wrestling with the government over regulations, associations and coalitions funded by media companies lobby feverishly to promote the interests of the private commercial companies. These groups—especially the National Cable Television Association and the National Association of Broadcasters—have produced campaigns and advertisements supporting the media companies' policy interests. The messages have been distributed nationwide for their members to broadcast and cablecast on their stations and systems, urging support for the associations' positions and asking viewers to contact Congress and the FCC with that support.

At times, however, media do not find it beneficial to widely cover and disseminate public policy proposals and legislation so as not to engender interest or opposition. Such was the case with the Telecommunications Act of 1996, where most coverage was buried in the business news pages and the political and public interest elements were not well explored.[16] The paucity of coverage was also obvious for the passage of the Newspaper Preservation Act and efforts to amend it to benefit monopolist newspapers even further.[17]

Many of the contemporary news processes and practices produce a significant homogenization of news and opinion. Dominant ideologies governing the definition of news and how it should be covered create the opportunities for economies of scale in the collection and distribution of news. This trend has led to the development of commercial companies designed to collect news and information and then sell it to media, providing services to any media that will buy. These news and feature syndicates now supply the bulk of materials of newspaper and magazines, although many readers believe that their favorite publications produce their own materials. Similar services now serve broadcasters in the United States and globally.

A growing number of businesses link print, broadcast, on-line, and other properties in the production of information programming. In doing so, they exchange information and/or stories and cooperate or coordinate coverage to avoid duplication of labor. The result is that fewer journalists or other observers cast an eye on events, and the coverage is similar in every medium involved. When fewer independent eyes are needed to view domestic and international events, fewer journalists are needed and bureaus close down. At its extreme, the buying or re-reporting of news and information leads to situations of journalists and media personalities interviewing each other and relying on each other as sources rather than finding the facts first hand. Ultimately, such practices lead to the major media reporting rumors, gossip, and false information because lesser media already did it.

The result of these interactions between media companies is that a large proportion of news and information comes from the same sources and is merely packaged and reused by various media, creating a homogenization of material. Even when major commercialized media create their own material, they do so with the same ideologies of news and information, thus limiting the perspectives and breadth of coverage.

Commercialized mainstream media do not behave much better in the area of opinion and ideas. Newspapers acquired by groups typically eschew partisan positions out of fear of offending readers and advertisers, particularly if the views are out of the mainstream or on controversial subjects such as abortion, the death penalty, or immigration. As a result they become minor equal-opportunity offenders, carrying syndicated columnists who express various accepted political viewpoints. In reality, the spectrum of views provided by the major commercial media companies is rather limited because terms such as *the left* and *the right* are used loosely. The left today is represented in most mainstream media by, at best, liberal voices, and the right is represented by the conservative branch of the Republican Party.

Media groups therefore promote dominant or acceptable frameworks of society and politics by focusing on political debates among easily accessible political figures and dominant organizations while generally ignoring political concerns outside those parameters. This indexing of opinion limits the range of debate by comparison to opinions throughout the society.[18]

Because political reality for the citizens is created by mediated communications, because most of what is communicated through media are "fantasies" contrived by those politicians and interest groups who wish to manipulate opinion, and because media convey these fantasies in ways designed to produce profit, the public is left with a distorted picture of politics that is designed to entertain, reassure, and manipulate by providing more style than substance.[19]

This manipulation of the public is compounded by market-driven approaches to television and print news that are designed to select and convey information that primarily entertains and diverts rather than informs the user or analyzes significant issues and problems in society. News that "sells" becomes an overriding concern, and companies make extensive efforts to find and convey news in ways that keep ratings high and support their financial goals.[20]

In news of politics, the emphasis on ratings leads to a scandal-driven, destructive style of journalism in which minor issues are blown out of proportion at the expense of coverage of more significant but less provocative issues. Political news therefore emphasizes the sensational: scandals, conflicts, mud-slinging, allegations, and investigations that produce little results. Many nongovernmental organizations now regularly exploit these emphases by feeding information that perpetuates the practice and supports their positions.

The problem also manifests itself in televised political talk shows, which have played a significant role in reducing much political discourse to extreme rhetoric, partisanship for the sake of conflict, and incivility. In pursuit of ratings, the talk shows pit parties against each other in what often degenerates into shouting matches. Policy opponents exchange verbal blows rather than discuss and exchange ideas. These self-serving approaches to news and discourse ultimately result in public distrust and resentment of politics and the media.

Implications of Concentration and Commercialization for Democratic Participation

Political theorists and media scholars recognize that preconditions for the establishment and preservation of democratic governance include freedom of expression for individuals and groups with divergent views. The basic tenets of democracy hold that through an airing of such views citizens will be able to choose the most meritorious from among the ideas and that society will be advanced.

In the realm of media theory and policy, this concept has been manifest in the idea that media plurality—in other words, multiple media outlets—is a primary goal for providing the opportunity for diverse voices to be heard and for ideas to circulate. The number of views about a particular event and the amount of information that units of each medium can carry are already limited by time and space constraints. Without plurality, the number of voices heard is further restricted. Although the existence of multiple media outlets makes it theoretically possible for a larger number of views and opinions to be communicated, the mere existence of media plurality does not ensure message pluralism—the diversity of viewpoints. Most studies of media content have shown that different units of a medium and different media tend to provide relatively similar content, programming, and views because of commercial concerns, the adoption of standard industry norms and business practices, and dependence on a small number of similar sources of news and opinion.

Because of these problems it does not matter greatly if a television station is owned by a large conglomerate such as Time Warner or by a smaller—but similarly motivated—media firm such as Hearst Corporation. In both cases the operations of the station, programming, and news choices will be decided on generally similar bases. The solution to such problems therefore must come not in the form of competition laws and regulations limiting ownership, but in policies and regulations that encourage the establishment of additional competing media. And, more important—because of the homogenization problems—policies are needed that provide for access to nonmainstream voices and alternative means of coverage of social and political issues.

In the United States and most of the developed world, the first goal of establishing additional competing media has been and continues to be accomplished. Much of the world has had a history of state-owned or state-controlled telecommunications and broadcasting supplemented by a commercial and party press. The primary commercial medium in many countries was the magazine. In Europe and some other developed parts of the world, the government monopolies in broadcasting and telecommunications were broken in the 1980s and 1990s, and they are now being supplemented by commercial systems subject to the same pressures as those seen in the United States.

The United States never had government monopolies, but the government supported monopolies in telecommunications and limited competition to protect broadcasting companies' investments. As in Europe, those monopolies and protections were diminished in the 1980s and 1990s.

The development of additional competing media, however, has engendered new forms of private ownership and commercial operation. Because they tend to follow the same practices that led to limitations on the marketplace of ideas, they have raised a great deal of interest about their effects. This is especially true where the deregulation and increasing commercialization of media and communications systems has been accompanied by the growth of large companies serving domestic and foreign markets worldwide. In their growth, these companies have bought up family-owned media and smaller enterprises.

But these changes in media ownership and communications systems cannot be universally condemned because they have created both more and less opportunity for political discourse and action. Changes in technology and deregulation have resulted in a larger number of broadcast stations, cable and satellite distribution systems, and broadcast and cable/satellite networks in the United States and throughout the world. These media changes, along with telecommunications developments that have made possible the wide diffusion of fax, e-mail, and related Internet services, have created more opportunities and means for communications, but at the same time have resulted in communications to smaller audiences and fewer individuals than were reached by traditional mass media.

As this chapter has shown, there is a tendency among observers of media to confuse the effects of commercialization and the private interests of media firms with concentration. Many of the complaints about media operations result not from there being fewer owners of few media; rather, they result from the proliferation of commercial firms that are willing to overtly act in their own self-interest.

In media that produce the largest audiences, commercial pressures dominate decisions. At the same time, such media are subjected to decreasing regulatory requirements and oversight. Consequently, they behave in ways designed to generate large audiences with little regard for social or cultural effects.

No nation has perfect mechanisms to respond to media concentration and commercialization. Each country faces unique circumstances and has different abilities to respond through legal and policy mechanisms. Concentration and/or commercialism can be seriously addressed, however, only when governments have a vision for the national, provincial, and local communications and media market structures and are vigilant in efforts to halt and reduce concentration and limit the harmful effects of a commercial media structure. They can pursue these goals by pursuing antitrust and other policy initiatives that limit or reverse concentration. They can also do so by working to reduce barriers to entry and promoting the entry of new noncommercial competitors. And they can do so by finding methods to promote content not determined by commercial needs alone. To achieve results, the initiatives of controlling concentration, promoting new competition, and countering commercialism need to operate simultaneously.

Private media companies, like all corporations, exist primarily to serve the economic self-interest of their owners. When that self-interest is at stake, the companies cannot be expected to remain guardians of the social interests. It is up to society, through government, to ensure that the self-interest does not continue to result in the types of harm that media concentration and commercialism produce.

Some communications executives argue that concentration is necessary to provide the strength that will permit their companies to compete domestically and internationally. This argument is sophistry but is heard more often as media and communication products and services are privatized around the world. The argument is erroneous for two important reasons. First, competitive ability is not merely a function of size but of the overall management and structure of the business. This is not to say that size is unimportant, because it can provide resources and economies of scale that are useful. But those resources and economies can be achieved even without concentration by diversification. Second, executives who use the argument that concentration is necessary for competitiveness ignore the fact that nearly all the businesses with whom they wish to compete have faced and continue to face significant limits on concentration in their home countries and many other countries in which they operate.

Voices heard in communications policy debates in the United States and elsewhere are predominantly those engaged in the business of communications. It is critically important for advocacy groups and other social organizations to become involved by monitoring the degrees of concentration and commercialism and by seeking regulations that control the behavior of media companies in ways that ensure that social and cultural interests are not harmed. The use of public policies and antitrust laws to protect or respond to harm must be increased, but most nations are not setting into place policies that adequately protect against abuses and countering those problems with positive measures.

Unless significant efforts are directed further than slowing the growth and abuses caused by commercial ownership and concentration, the situation will not improve. Until policies address the types and kinds of content provided, ensure access for a broader spectrum of producers and voices, and find ways to allow groups and smaller companies without great financial resources to become owners or operators of media, complaints about the contemporary media system will continue without seriously changing the existing situation or trends.

Commercial media are obligated to pursue profit and maximize company value, so they can be expected to voluntarily temper their self-interests only if offered incentives to do so. In the past intangible benefits such as prestige and influence were effective, but they are rarely valued today. The primary incentives today are economic—profits, growth in company value, and minimal requirements to obtain or retain broadcasting licenses.

The challenge of persuading media entities to provide content that serves social functions is significant because most content that supports public interests and democratic processes—news, commentary, and political discussions—does not attract large audiences and is often more expensive to produce and less profitable than other types of content.

Despite our convictions about the importance of media in democratic society, we must recognize that media are not a necessary and sufficient condition for democracy. Although media—especially those with news and public service operations—create public forums for discussion and review of public life that are important in large-scale societies, those functions are not exclusive to media. A lack of effective options made news organizations the focus of such activity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but changes in communication technologies and abilities have made other forums possible.

Given the poor performance of many news organizations in serving public needs and the rising possibilities presented by new technology, we may need to seriously consider whether the conditions that led the nation's founders to grant the press constitutional protection still exist or whether the diminished role that many news organizations play today will make them irrelevant in the future.

The classic roles of news organizations in the past were based on coordinating activities and representing interests among citizens and all the institutions of society, informing citizens of developments, overseeing the actions of government and other powerful institutions and entities, and ensuring citizens' views and interests were effectively represented. The press became an intermediary between the public and governments when democratic societies grew to the point that it was not possible for individual voices to be widely heard or to carry significant influence. The public opinion concept—linking citizens to governors—developed in an era when the speed of communication and the technical ability of individuals to communicate were severely limited. Although the need for such linkage remains, new technologies are empowering individuals to do it themselves by means such as talk radio, Web sites, blogs, and discussion groups—all avenues of e-citizenship. Unless society and news organizations reemphasize the position of media in social functions, the significance of media in the processes of democratic participation and governance will continue to decline and other communication functions and institutions will take their place.

Notes

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18. Indexing refers to the hypotheses associated with Robert Entman and Lance Bennett that a relationship exists between the opinions expressed by political leaders and elites and that expressed in major media. The views expressed in the media thus serve as an "index" to the views expressed by those dominant forces. For how the indexing of opinion occurs, see Robert M. Entman, *Democracy Without Citizens: Media and the Decay of American Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); and W. Lance Bennett, "Toward a Theory of Press-State Relations in the United States," *Journal of Communication* 40 (1990): 103–125.

19. These processes of distortion are developed in Dan Nimmo and James E. Combs, *Mediated Political Realities,* 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 1990); Kathleen Hall Jamison and Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, *The Interplay of Influence,* 2nd ed. (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1988); and W. Lance Bennett, *News: The Politics of Illusion,* 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 1996).

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