

It's a wrap? Why media matters to democracy

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In this final contribution to the **openDemocracy** debate on media ownership, I wish to deal with two issues. First, I want to clarify my core argument, if only because Ben Compaine [0] has so misrepresented it in his unfortunate turn to namecalling, after he conceded he could not defend his arguments. (And Mr. Compaine wonders why his work is not even cited by those who agree with him?)

In the second section I return to the gist of the matter: why media are important. There are numerous ways to get insight into the problem of the media status quo, and herein I address but one of them: journalism. I review the US press coverage of the three most important stories in recent memory: the current War on Terrorism, the Enron scandal, and the 2000 election.

In my view these three cases all point directly to the anti-democratic nature of our current media regime, and the serious and troubling implications this situation holds. I apologize for emphasizing the United States before a global audience, but space limitations do not permit me to extrapolate to a global argument.

A radical sunburst

I was first asked by **openDemocracy** to launch a debate on media, globalization, and democracy over a year ago. I responded [0] with a piece that argued that a profit-driven, oligopolistic media system had severe flaws for the exercise of democracy, in particular for journalism and the public sphere. I argued that media systems are not “natural,” but they are the direct result of explicit public policies. Even privately run systems can only exist as the result of policies such as copyright that make their existence possible. In the case of radio, television, telephony, cable and satellite TV, the entire systems were the result of government licensed monopolies to frequencies or franchises.

The core issue is not whether the government, the polity, will or should play a role in media, but rather, what role the government plays and whose interests it serves. I argued that a crucial problem in the United States was that these media policies had been drafted behind closed doors in a corrupt manner to suit corporate interests. I suggested such a pattern also existed elsewhere, though by no means to the same extent. And I concluded that if we were serious about democracy, we needed to blast open media policy debates nationally and internationally, and generate a media system with a much larger independent nonprofit and noncommercial sector. We could not expect the Internet to do our work for us; as remarkable a technology as it is, the Internet has distinct limits and is ultimately shaped, too, by policies and regulation.

In the United States views such as mine are rarely heard, except on the margins. The perspective is effectively *verboten* on the commercial media, which are inundated by right wing commentators informing us that the media have a left-wing bias. Yet, from my experience giving one to two hundred public talks or media interviews per year, what is striking is how much interest there is in discussing the issues I raise across the political spectrum.

Even political conservatives do not like the corporate welfare and corruption of giving away tens of billions of dollars in TV spectrum to a handful of corporations. They do not like having their children's brains marinated in advertising. They do not like having schlock journalism that regurgitates press releases or discusses celebrity lifestyles. They do not like political campaigns based on moronic and insulting TV ads. They do not like policies that let a single company own one thousand two hundred radio stations. And most people have no idea that they have a right to reform the media system. When they learn that they can actually change the media, it is like the sun bursting through the sky for the first time.

What I am trying to do is not merely to get a specific critique of media in play, but more important, to put informed public consent behind the policies that built this media system. I am more than willing to live with the outcome of an informed public debate. My argument is radical in the sense that I recommend structural change in our media system, but it grows out of core liberal democratic theory at its base: it is the right of the people to determine the media system that best protects and promotes democratic values.

Indeed, the proposals I recommend and work on are almost all content neutral, or viewpoint neutral. They will simply open up the media system to more voices, and allow for a greater number of media to operate along nonprofit and noncommercial lines. And I believe that any proposals I have will only benefit by examination and deliberation.

Why media matter: three case studies

How does US media performance match up to rudimentary liberal democratic standards? Among the core needs for a free press are: 1) to monitor elections to make sure that they are fair; 2) to monitor governments so they do not engage in war without informed public consent; and 3) to monitor the exercise of government so that corruption does not go unchecked.

We have had three major stories that go directly to each of these issues in the past eighteen months. How has Mr. Compaine's beloved media system fared?

The War on Terrorism

Going to war is arguably the single most important decision any society can make. The track record of the US news media in the twentieth century is that they often went along with fraudulent efforts to get the nation into one war or another by the administration in power. These are considered the dark moments in US journalism history.

What is most striking in the US news coverage following the 11 September attacks is how it followed this lamentable pattern; the very debate over whether to go to war, or how best to respond, did not even exist. Tough questions were ignored. Why should we believe that a militarized approach would be effective? Moving beyond the 11 September attacks, why should the United States be entitled to determine – as judge, jury, and executioner – who is a terrorist or a terrorist sympathizer in this global war? What about international law?

Most conspicuous was the complete absence of comment on one of the most striking features of the war campaign, something that any credible journalist would be quick to observe were the events taking place in Russia or China or Pakistan: there are very powerful interests in the United States who greatly benefit politically and economically by the establishment of an unchecked war on terrorism. This consortium of interests can be called, to use President Eisenhower's term, the military-industrial complex. It blossomed during the Cold War when the fear of Soviet imperialism – real or alleged – justified its creation and expansion. A nation with a

historically small military now had a permanent war economy, and powerful special interests benefited by its existence.

For journalists to raise issues like these did not presuppose that they opposed government policies, merely that the policies needed to be justified and explained, so the support would be substantive, not ephemeral, the result of deliberation, not manipulation. Such has not been the case. Much of mainstream US journalism has been, to be frank, propagandistic. In this climate it should be no surprise that most Americans support the war, though they knew next to nothing about the region we were fighting in and its history, or the US role in the world.

Now let's be clear about why the coverage has been so deplorable. It is not due directly to concentrated media ownership, or meddling CEOs – although the very firms that are now saluting “America's New War” are also going before the Bush Administration asking for ownership deregulation that will make all of them much larger and more profitable. The main reason for this distorted coverage is due to the weaknesses of professional journalism as it has been practiced in the United States.

As I argued in my first **openDemocracy** article, professional journalism itself arose in the United States in large part as a response to concentrated newspaper markets; i.e. so monopoly newspaper owners would offer a credible “non-partisan” journalism so that their business enterprises would not be undermined. To avoid the taint of partisanship, and to keep costs lower, professionalism makes official or credentialed sources the basis for news stories. Reporters report what people in power say, and what they debate. This tends to give the news an establishment bias. When a journalist reports what official sources are saying, or debating, she is professional. When she steps outside this range of official debate to provide alternative perspectives or to raise issues those in power prefer not to discuss, she is no longer being professional.

In matters of international politics, “official sources” are almost interchangeable with the term “elites,” as foreign policy is mostly a preserve of the wealthy and powerful few – C. Wright Mills's classic power elite. At its worst, in a case like the current war on terrorism, where the elites and official sources are unified on the core issues, the nature of our press coverage is uncomfortably close to that found in authoritarian societies with limited formal press freedom.

Many working journalists would recoil at that statement. Their response would be that professional reliance on official sources is justifiable as “democratic” because the official sources are elected or accountable to people who are elected by the citizenry. The problem with this rationale for stenography is that it forgets a critical assumption of free press theory: even leaders determined by election need a rigorous monitoring, the range of which cannot be determined solely by their elected opposition. Otherwise the citizenry has no way out of the status quo, no capacity to criticize the political culture as a whole. If such a watchdog function becomes lax, corruption invariably grows, and the electoral system decays. If journalism that goes outside the range of elite opinion is dismissed as unprofessional or partisan, and therefore justifiably ignored, the media merely lock in a corrupt status quo and can offer no way out. If journalists require having official sources on their side to pursue a story, it gives people in power a massive veto power over the exercise of democracy.

This problem becomes acute in a political environment like the United States, where electoral laws and campaign costs have made politics a fiefdom for the super wealthy and those who represent the super wealthy. Over ninety per cent of the “hard money” contributions to congressional and presidential campaigns come from the wealthiest one per cent of Americans. By relying on official sources, our journalism does not pose a democratic challenge to plutocracy, but rather cements it in. One need only think of the coverage Ralph Nader received,

especially in the *New York Times*, in the 2000 presidential race. Andrei Sakharov's treatment by *Pravda* in the 1970s could not have been much worse.

Enron

There is no better example of this than the Enron scandal which unfolded in late 2001 and the early months of 2002. This was a shocking story because, although evidence of Enron's shady operations had been cropping up since at least the mid 1990s, the *rah rah* corporate journalism of our era was falling all over itself praising Enron as the exemplar of the New Economy. Only when the company approached bankruptcy did it rate as a news story.

Now that it is clear that the Enron affair is a stunning example of supreme political corruption, the coverage increasingly concentrates upon the business collapse of Enron, and the chicanery of Arthur Andersen, rather than the sleazy way in which it worked, legally as well as illegally, using the political system to make billions of dollars ripping off consumers, taxpayers and workers. It will not turn into a political crisis that will end careers and lead to major political reform because the opposition Democrats are in no hurry to push the story to its logical political conclusion, since so many of them will be implicated as well.

So professional journalism is restricted to the range of what those in power pursue, and the balance of the population has no one representing *its* interests. What about those who simply want the whole truth to come out, and the system changed so this sort of corruption is less likely ever to occur in the future? They are out of luck. This is very bad for liberal democracy. If the press system cannot lead to peaceful and credible reform of corruption, it only means the problems will get worse and the costs of an eventual resolution significantly greater.

Moreover, the corporate media have special incentive not to push the Enron story too far. Were discussion of Enron and energy policies to lead to any sustained examination of the way communication policies are produced behind closed doors in Washington – arguably the most off-limits story in US journalism in our times – it would find a thick stench that would rival anything Enron has done.

The 2000 Election

Finally, consider the manner in which the press reported President Bush's "victory" in the 2000 election. It is now clear that the majority of the people in Florida who went to vote for president in November 2000, intended to vote for Al Gore. The semi-official recount conducted by the major news media in 2001 showed that by every conceivable way the votes might be counted, Al Gore won Florida. But Al Gore isn't president. Why is that?

Or, to put it another way, why didn't the press coverage assure that the true winner would assume office. After all, if the free press cannot guarantee the integrity of elections, what good is it? The primary reason is due to sourcing: throughout November and early December of 2000, the news media were being told by all Republicans that the Republicans had won the election and Al Gore was trying to steal it. The Democrats, on the other hand, were far less antagonistic and showed much less enthusiasm to fight for what they had won. Hence the news coverage, reflecting what their sources were telling them, tended to reflect the idea that the Republicans had won and the Democrats were grasping for straws.

When Greg Palast broke the story in Britain in November 2000 that the Florida Republicans had systematically and illegally excluded tens of thousands of poor Floridians from voting (certainly enough to cost Gore the state), no US mainstream news medium dared pick it up, though the story was true. Why? Most likely because journalists would have been out on their own,

because the Democrats had elected not to fight on this issue. Once the Supreme Court made its final decision, the media were elated to announce that our national nightmare was over. The media had helped anoint a president. The only losers were the irrelevant and powerless souls who clung to the belief that whoever gets the most votes should win the election, and that the press should tell the whole truth and let the chips fall where they may.

The willingness of the mainstream US news media to suspend criticism of President Bush almost *in toto* after 11 September should be considered in this light. (Suddenly the moronic child of privilege became another Lincoln, albeit one who preferred lifting weights to reading books.) When the recount report indicating that Gore won Florida was released two months after 11 September, what was striking was how almost all the press reported that the results were mixed or that Bush had won. The reason for the press making this judgment was it only looked at the recount in the few counties where Al Gore had requested it; who actually won the actual election in Florida seemed not to interest the press one whit.

In a manner of thinking, the press had no choice but to provide this interpretation. If the media conceded that Gore, in fact, had won the race in Florida, it would have made people logically ask, “why didn’t the media determine this when it mattered?” Moreover, a concession that the United States had an unelected president would make the laudatory coverage of President Bush after 11 September look increasingly like the sort of paeans to “maximum leaders” expected from the news media in tinhorn dictatorships. As soon as the leaders are not the product of free and fair elections, the professional reliance on official sources – which is wobbly by democratic standards to begin with – collapses.

Mr. Compaine and I agree on one thing. There are no simple solutions to the problem of media. It will require study and debate and political organizing if we are to get the sort of media system befitting a self-governing people. There will never be perfect solutions either. Mr. Compaine argues that, as an article of faith, this is the best possible media system in a damned fine world. So, logically, it is wrong for the public to take any interest in this issue, because anything it does to alter current media policies can only make matters worse.

I see the matter differently. In my view, it will be impossible to live in a humane and peaceful world, not to mention a democratic society, when the media system is the province of a handful of massive profit-seeking firms, answerable only to their bottom lines. Democratizing media debates and reforming media systems are not the most important issues in the world today, but they are on any short list of necessary areas for democratic renewal. If the media system remains as is, it puts distinct barriers on the range and nature of political activity.

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