Six Media Giants Control 90% Of What You Read, Watch, Hear

Description

Directors of these 6 media giants also sit on over 500 other giant corporations and 30 percent of those interlocks are within the same 6 companies. This is nepotism of the most dysfunctional nature that creates a predictable echo chamber that brainwashes entire populations. This is a must-read report. ? TN Editor

“We can have democracy in this country, or we can have great wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we can’t have both.” — *Supreme Court Justice Louis D. Brandeis*

On a crisp November day in 2014, as I hustled through Boston’s Downtown Crossing at rush hour, I got a call that would change the course of my career: I was offered my first full-time journalism job, as a tech and startups reporter for a local online outlet called BostInno. When I look back on that moment and recall the dizzying rush of excitement that set in, I see an idealistic young woman who has yet to understand the way the media machine really works. I wish I could somehow temper her expectations. I wish I could protect her from the crushing disappointment that comes with realizing this industry she’s chosen isn’t what she naively thinks it is.

Not too long before I was hired, BostInno had been acquired by American City Business Journals, the largest publisher of metropolitan business newsweeklies in the U.S. In my early conversations with colleagues, it was apparent they were still adjusting to post-acquisition life. Sure, there were perks that came with being acquired — but the pressure to hit lofty traffic goals meant writers now had to prioritize certain clickbaity stories over others. Moreover, I distinctly remember a fixation on quantity. Writers were expected to churn out at least three or four stories a day in an effort to reach as wide an audience as possible, which frustratingly, meant we often didn’t have time to cover complex topics in the depth required. Our experience, as it turns out, is not exactly a unique one.

In a recent survey I conducted, 60% of journalists said they’d worked for a publication that got bought by a larger company while they were there — and 40% of that group admitted to witnessing negative changes in their job expectations or work environment after the acquisition.

If you examine the history of countless media mergers and acquisitions over the last several decades, you'll come to an unsettling discovery: local, independent outlets are dying out in droves. The result? The vast majority of the news you digest is tailored to serve the interests of corporations and their leaders, rather than citizens.

> The Great Media Consolidation continues:
>
> – NYT buys The Athletic
> – BuzzFeed buys Complex
> – VOX buys GroupNine
> – Axel Springer buys Politico
> – Dot Dash buys Meredith
> – Minute Media buys Player's Tribune
>
> What's next? https://t.co/P435ij5Zxc
>
> — Cristian Nyari (@Cnyari) January 6, 2022

It may go without saying, but the media plays an almost nauseatingly prominent role in our everyday lives, especially here in the United States. In fact, Americans spend an average of 12 and a half hours per day consuming news via the television, Internet, newspapers, magazines, and radio. The media molds our society in a myriad of ways. It tells us which world events deserve our attention. It has the power to affect what we buy. In shaping our opinions on everything from immigration, healthcare, education, and the environment to individual political candidates, it can also have significant sway when it comes to elections. Studies have shown that media coverage sometimes has a strong impact on criminal court decisions, particularly for violent crimes. And by influencing consumers and investors, our current 24-hour real-time news cycle can impact our economic climate, driving the market values of certain industries and companies (this is known as "the CNN effect").

But have you ever noticed that so much of what you're reading, seeing, and hearing has started to sound — well, exactly the same? You're not imagining things. There's even a name for this phenomenon: "the illusion of choice." We're presented with what feels like an endless array of options for where to get our news. But in reality, the information from most of those sources trickles down from the same few conglomerates. Year after year, economic power has become increasingly concentrated across numerous industries — including tech, healthcare, banking, airlines, and pharmaceuticals. In fact, mergers reached a record high of $5.8 trillion in 2021. If you ever took Economics 101, you're probably well aware that monopolies are great for the providers and bad for consumers — by eliminating competition, they give corporations in control no incentive to improve, innovate, or otherwise meet our needs, desires, and expectations.

So, how did we get here? During the 1940s, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) adopted a number of rules to limit ownership of multiple local radio stations and television stations, as well as multiple national broadcast networks. Then in the '70s, the FCC banned one company from owning both a newspaper and TV or radio station in the same market. But during the '80s, major deregulatory moves made by Congress and the FCC under then-president Ronald Reagan's administration increased thenumber of TV stations any single entity could own, triggering a wave of media mergers.

The real kiss of death to local news happened in 1996 when President Bill Clinton signed the Telecommunications Act, which allowed large corporations already dominating the media market to further expand their control via acquisitions and mergers. Only 3% of Congress voted against this bill, including then House of Representatives member Bernie Sanders. In the years following, more and more small outlets and stations either got gobbled up by the big guys or outright failed because they simply couldn't compete with them.

Then, in 2017, the FCC reversed a regulation that opened the floodgates on consolidation even further. That regulation had prevented one company from owning multiple television stations in markets that didn't have at least eight independent stations, and prevented one company from owning both a newspaper and broadcast station or TV and radio station in the same market. Finally, in 2021, the Supreme Court overturned an appeals ruling asking the FCC to study the potential impact on female and minority ownership in the media industry before loosening restrictions on ownership. At the time, Justice Brett Kavanaugh — who wrote the ruling — claimed that not only was there zero evidence that relaxing these rules would cause any harm, but that consolidation could *benefit* consumers.

As for the consequences of all this deregulation — whereas 50 companies dominated the media landscape in 1983, that dwindled to nine companies by the 1990s. It got worse from there.

Today, just six conglomerates — Comcast, Disney, AT&T, Sony, Fox, and Paramount Global (formerly known as ViacomCBS) — control 90% of what you watch, read, or listen to. To put this into perspective: that means about 232 media executives have the power to decide what information 277 million Americans are able to access. In 2021, the "big six" banked a total of more than $478 billion in revenue. That's more than both Finland's and Ukraine's GDP combined.

The issue extends to print media and radio giants, too: iHeartMedia owns 863 radio stations nationwide , while Gannett owns over 100 daily U.S. newspapers and nearly 1,000 weeklies.

As the pool controlling the media keeps shrinking, so does the breadth of the information reported. Hence why today's thousands of news outlets often churn out embarrassingly duplicative content.

One glaring issue with these sweeping regulatory changes is that they passed with little publicity, meaning citizens had little to no opportunity to push back. In fact, a 2003 Pew Research study found that a whopping 72% of Americans heard absolutely nothing at all about changing rules for media ownership. But when asked how they felt about relaxing the rules for how many media outlets corporations can own, far more Americans said they thought it would have a negative impact than a positive one.

According to Jeff Cohen, founder of Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) and RootsAction and author of "Cable News Confidential: My Misadventures in Corporate Media," the Telecommunications Act progressed largely under the radar.

"The public didn't vote on it, or know about it," he told me in an interview. "Conglomeration and the shrinkage of media diversity happened because of backroom legislation and rule-making, out of sight of the public."

In fact, when a consumer group tried to buy ad space on CNN to criticize the Telecommunications Bill, Cohen says CNN wouldn't sell them the time. It's not all that surprising when you consider how powerful Big Media lobbyists are: An OpenSecrets report shows that NCTA – The Internet & Television Association (which represents more than 90% of the U.S. cable market) spent more than $14 million trying to influence government policy in 2021, while Comcast shelled out $13.38 million, putting them both in the top 15 spenders for lobbying.

Not only were Americans kept mostly in the dark about these regulatory moves, but information about their implications may have been intentionally hidden. In 2006, former FCC attorney Adam Candeub claimed the FCC allegedly buried a federal study proving more concentration of media ownership would hurt local news coverage. Senior managers ordered staff to destroy "every last piece" of the report, according to Candeub. Still, other research has since revealed the same worrisome findings: a 2019 study showed that stations newly acquired by Sinclair increased their focus on national politics by around 25% — at the expense of covering local politics.

Nowadays, there are entire cities and towns across the country with no local coverage. According to a 2018 study, more than 2,000 U.S. counties (63.6%) have no daily newspaper, while 1,449 counties (46%) only have one. Meanwhile, 171 counties — totaling 3.2 million residents — have zero newspapers whatsoever. These areas are known as "news deserts," and studies have shown they have fewer candidates running for mayor, lower voter turnout, and more government corruption. When citizens are left with a colossal information gap, they're forced to turn to social media to get their news.

One of the media giants responsible for this trend is Sinclair Broadcast Group, which now owns or operates 185 television stations across 620 channels in 86 U.S. markets. In the above compilation video, the anchors parroting the same exact script about the dangers of "fake news" all worked for Sinclair-owned stations. While expressing concerns about the negative effects of media consolidation in a 2017 interview with Democracy Now!, former FCC Commissioner Michael Copps called Sinclair the "most dangerous company out there that people have never heard of" due not only to the scope of its control but also its well-known ideological agenda.

In his book "The New Media Monopoly," the late author Ben Bagdikian asserts that today's big six have amassed more communications power than was ever wielded by any dictatorship in history. Worse yet, he notes that close-knit hierarchies like these find ways to "cooperate" to keep expanding their power.

"They jointly invest in the same ventures, and they even go through motions that, in effect, lend each other money and swap properties when it is mutually advantageous," Bagdikian writes.

Christopher Terry, an assistant professor of media law at the University of Minnesota, started his career in the radio industry as a producer for Hearst and ClearChannel in the mid-'90s — during the height of this consolidation frenzy.

"I saw what it did for the stations that I worked for, and I didn't like it," he told me in an interview.

Terry had been working for a conservative talk station in Milwaukee when it was acquired by ClearChannel, triggering drastic staff cuts.

"Prior to consolidation, we were a legitimate source with a fully operational newsroom," he explained. "I didn't necessarily agree with our politics all the time, but I liked that it was focused on the things people need information about, and it had local ties. It was an operation that was contributing to the public good."

Experts like Terry and Cohen will tell you there are numerous reasons why media consolidation is bad for our democracy. In the documentary"Is The Press Really Free?" sociology professor and former Project Censored director Dr. Peter Phillips points out that as a direct result of the staff cuts caused by consolidation, reporters often become increasingly dependent on PR people for stories. He calls this a form of structural censorship — when a large portion of the news has been pre-written by a PR professional who works for a public or private bureaucracy, that means the stories are spun to meet the needs of corporations or the government in advance.

Nolan Higdon, a media studies and history lecturer and author of "The Anatomy of Fake News," also notes that this concentration of power has meant fewer checks and balances — without the pressure that comes with competition, conglomerates aren't likely to be challenged for their questionable practices.

"When most of the news is controlled by six corporations, and Internet traffic is controlled by five or six companies that privilege those companies under the auspices of fighting 'fake news,' you can lie with impunity," Higdon told me. "And worse, because we're a fragmented audience, if I'm being lied to every single day by *The Washington Post*, I'm not going to turn on Fox or read *The Wall Street Journal* to hear I'm being lied to. I'm going to be in my little information bubble."

As these media corporations continue to expand their power, they rake in ever-growing profits — which then translates to more political influence. Not only do owners of media giants contribute money directly to campaigns, but their outlets control the discourse around them. And the larger the conglomerate, the more easily and effectively they can lobby to kill regulations and pass laws that further their domination.

But this consolidation of power extends beyond just monopolies and mergers galore — compounding the issue are shared board members. All media corporations have a board of directors, which is responsible for making decisions that support the interests of stakeholders. When someone sits on the board at multiple companies, that creates an "interlock." Scroll through *The New York Times* board of directors, for example, and you'll find a certain member is also on the board for McDonald's and Nike and is chairman of Ariel Investments. Up until last year, a Disney chairwoman happened to be on the board for private equity giant The Carlyle Group.

A 2021 study published in *Mass Communication & Society* (MCS) revealed that publicly traded American newspaper companies were interlocked by 1,276 connections to 530 organizations. The data showed that about 36% of these connections were to other media organizations, 20% to advertisers, 16% to financial institutions, 12% to tech ?rms, and 2% to government and political entities.

More specifically, a 2012 list compiled by FAIR revealed the following interlocks:

- **CBS/Viacom**:Amazon, Pfizer, CVS, Dell, Cardinal Health, and Verizon

- **Fox/News Corp**:Rothschild Investment Corporation, Phillip Morris, British Airways, and New York Stock Exchange
- **ABC/Disney**:Boeing, City National Bank, FedEx, and HCA Healthcare
- **NBC**:Anheuser-Busch, Morgan Chase & Co., Coca-Cola, and Chase Manhattan
- **CNN/TimeWarner**:Citigroup, American Express, Fannie Mae, Colgate-Palmolive, Hilton Hotels, PepsiCo, Sears, and Pfizer
- **The New York Times Co**: Johnson & Johnson, Ford, Texaco, Alcoa, Avon, Campbell Soup, Metropolitan Life, and Starwood Hotels & Resorts

(And those are just a few examples of the more than 300 crossovers FAIR discovered.)

Some say it would be naive not to suspect that interlocking directorates don't cause a major conflict of interest — allowing news content to potentially be shaped by profit-driven motives. As former Walt Disney chief executive Michael Eisner put it in an infamous leaked internal memo: "We have no obligation to make history. We have no obligation to make art. We have no obligation to make a statement. To make money is our only objective."

As it turns out, there's evidence to legitimize this concern. In a 2021 *MCS* study, more than 30% of editors reported experiencing some form of pressure on the newsroom from their parent company or its board of directors. And 29% said they knew reporters had "self-censored" due to such interference. Pressured editors admitted to taking a more relaxed approach in reporting practices when interlocked individuals or organizations were the topics of news coverage. They also admitted to lowering their expectations for balance in coverage of board members.

Higdon noted that it can be especially problematic when media board members also happen to sit on the boards of defense companies — because such an interlock can lead to an increasing push for pro-war narratives. (As of 2011, before U.S. troops withdrew from Iraq, Raytheon interlocked with *The New York Times*, and Lockheed Martin interlocked with *The Washington Post*). The Intercept's recent video of a White House Press briefing on the Ukraine-Russia conflict illustrates this perfectly. In the video, members of the media are shown repeatedly asking questions framed around why President Biden isn't providing Ukraine with more military support. If you know what questions they're asking, you can pretty much guess what angle their story will be taking. And in this case, every journalist is laser-focused on what needs to happen to escalate this into U.S. war involvement with Russia. The Intercept's Ryan Grim is quite literally the only member of the media asking what the U.S. is doing to encourage negotiations for peace.

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