

Analyse the political implications of concentrated media ownership and control.

[Entertainment](#), [Journalism](#)



The media is primarily used to disseminate information. It is a platform for communication between the people and those who hold authority. In today's world the media has an immense role in the functioning of society and has the ability to reach a mass audience through technologies such as print, Internet, television, film and radio. There has been increasing concern over the growing concentration of media ownership as well as how this increased media control influences and shapes democracy. Concentrated media ownership refers to the number of individuals or corporations who control an increasing share in the mass media market, which at present is very few. For example, eleven out of twelve major Australian Newspapers are owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation or John Fairfax Holdings (Independent Australia, 2011). Society has seen media moguls, such as Rupert Murdoch, dominate cross-media ownership with companies in print, television, film etc. The media and politics are closely intertwined and with an increase in concentrated media ownership and control, issues such as political bias; the trivialisation and sensationalism of political issues in the pursuit of profits; and the decreasing amount of editorial diversity and expression, have become issues of concern for the consumers of this mass media. Street describes bias as " the idea that the practices of journalists and editors result in articles and programmes that favour one view of the world over another, providing sustenance for one set of interests while undermining an alternative" (Street, 2011). Bias is a large issue within all media, and authorities enforce a myriad of regulations and restrictions on media corporations to try and eliminate it. With an increase in media concentration, and the power that the media yields, eliminating political bias within the

media has become an important issue. Since most of the media institutions are owned by corporations, such as Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, the most common assumption is that the media as a whole may be influenced by its owners. For instance, there are times when the owners' decision may affect the kind of information that media would disclose to the public.

Wagner makes the point that " the news media distribute much of the information we receive about the world around us. Thousands of politicians, policy researchers and opinion makers wish to transmit information to the public at large. The news media serve as intermediaries in this information market, selecting to transmit a fraction of the millions of potential messages to an audience" (Wagner, 1997). For example, Rupert Murdoch's Fox News channel was been criticised for its right-tilted news coverage. Murdoch has always been seen to favour the conservative side of politics and the Fox News channel has been seen to show preference toward the Republican Government in America. Fox Founder and president Rodger Ailes was a republican political operative in Washington. He helped with The Nixon and Reagan campaigns as well as the elder Bush's media strategy for his presidential campaign in 1988 (Ackerman, 2001). David Asman, The Fox News Channel's daytime anchor was known for his association with the right-wing Wall Street Journal. Another anchor for Fox News, Tony Snow, was a conservative columnist and also the chief speechwriter for the first bush administration (Ackerman, 2001). The Fox News Channel also hosted employees and presenters such as Eric Breindel, John Moody and Bill O'Reilly, all of whom were known for their conservative, right wing views (Ackerman, 2001). Rupert Murdoch stated, " " I challenge anybody to show

me an example of bias in Fox News Channel." (Ackerman, 2001) However, looking at the individuals that were in charge of disseminating the news at Fox, it is hard to believe that none of the political stories covered by Fox did not favour the more conservative side of American politics. Media conglomerates, such as News Corporation, have the ability to sway public opinion and with the increasing control they have access to, it is naive to think that they would not use this power to influence and sway public opinion to fit with their own agendas and ideologies. The size of the enormous media firms of today exceeds the size of the largest firms fifteen years ago by a factor of ten. (McChesney, 1999). With this increase in the size of the major media corporations also comes the increased pursuit of profits by these firms. Sometimes, this pursuit of profit can be to the detriment of information and in turn democracy. Corporations look for stories that will attract and entertain readers and viewers, sometimes neglecting stories that hold high information content and reflect political policies and agendas. McChesney refers to this need to maximise profits when he states " With the tremendous pressure to attract audiences but to keep costs down and not take chances, the standard route of the media giants is to turn to the tried and true formulas of sex and violence, always attention getters" (McChesney, 1999, p34). With the increased emphasis on profit maximisation and the commercialisation of news media, there is a risk that consumers of news media will cease to have access to information regarding smaller issues in society such as local political policy/s and other more localised issues. Because these issues are small and aren't seen as revenue earners, or important issues, they may be sacrificed to make way for big stories and

scandals. In other words, profit and revenue may become more important, in the eyes of media conglomerates, than information. The pure size of the media and its influence over information has huge impacts on democracy and politics. Meier (2011) sites Giddens in his work. Giddens talks about the trivializing of political issues and personas and states " The media... have a double relation to democracy. On the one hand ... the emergence of a global information society is a powerful democratising force. Yet, television, and the other media, tend to destroy the very public space of dialogue they open up, through relentless trivializing, and personalizing of political issues. Moreover, the growth of giant multinational media corporations means that unelected business tycoons can hold enormous power" (p 298). In essence, Giddens is stating that while news media and media corporations may broadcast political issues and policies, these views are somewhat destroyed with the constant emphasis on the politicians themselves. Because of this a great deal of emphasis is taken away from the real political issues. An example of this is the constant criticism of Julia Gillard and her lifestyle. For example, she is an unmarried woman; her partner is a hairdresser. There is also constant evaluation of her hairstyle, wardrobe, her figure and her voice. Gillard is constantly known for stabbing Kevin Rudd in the back. She has also been portrayed as untrustworthy as well as a liar. Instead of the media evaluating and critiquing her policies and looking critically at her as a leader, we see the media sensationalising the above trivial issues instead of concentrating on what she is doing for the country politically. As Media concentration and control increases, diversity of expression decreases. In all healthy democracies, a wide range of assorted opinions are offered, and

media offer a large variety of different positions, values and biases. No individual is obliged to accept any particular position or argument, but they are encouraged to have put their own views and criticisms forward. The core problem that comes with media concentration is that it diminishes ideological diversity within the media system. Studies have been conducted that show that although there may be more media outlets, there is not necessarily more information or diversity in media. " Rather than the new platforms leading to a diversity of voices, voices are in fact being snuffed out... An analysis of independent media showed that 96 per cent of stories simply came from recycling stories found in the mainstream press. However, The study also showed that the mainstream press was producing 73 percent less information than 10 years ago" (independent Australia, 2011). Curran states that " they can use their financial power to drive new entrants out of the marketplace by launching expensive promotional campaigns, offering discounts to advertisers or buying up key creative personnel" (Curran, 2005) Because of the increased power of media corporations, they have the ability to eliminate their competition and therefore decrease the amount of diversity available to the consumer. Robert W. McChesney outlines in his book Corporate Media and the Threat to Democracy that there are three factors that allow democracy to work at its best. The first is " it helps when there are not significant disparities in economic wealth and property ownership across the society" (1997, p5). The second requires there to be " a sense of community and a notion that an individuals well- being is determined to no small extent by the community's well-being" (1997, p5). Finally McChesney states " democracy requires that there be an effective

system of political communication" (1997, p5). Media concentration and control works to the detriment of each of these factors. Firstly the multi billion dollar media corporations, do not represent economic equality within the society, in fact they help to make the gap between the working classes and authority increase. Media concentration disputes McChesney's second factor as media moguls and corporations have become increasingly focused on the pursuit of large profits and personal gain, and are not heavily influenced around society's wellbeing. Finally, an effective system of political communication should be based around diversity of news coverage and diversity of political issues, both locally and nationally, large and small. However, with the increasing size of corporations the diversity of expression has steadily decreased. Australia has one of the highest media concentrations in the free world. With the increasing control held by mass media conglomerates various political issues arise such as political bias; the trivialisation and sensationalism of political issues in the pursuit of profits; and the decreasing amount of editorial diversity and expression. The above issues threaten democracy and the media must be regulated and controlled before it threatens how the political system in Australia functions. Governments need to manage media moguls, such as Rupert Murdoch before they gain too much power, and control, over political issues and coverage. The key to a democratic society is freedom of information, positive political debate and communication. These key functions of a democratic society are being threatened by concentrated mass media and the increasing control held by these corporations. References Ackerman, S 2001, The Most Biased Name in News, Fox News Channel's Extraordinary right-

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