

ARTICLES



FREE THE MEDIA

MARK CRISPIN MILLER

The chart in our centerfold offers just a partial guide to our contracting media cosmos. It demonstrates the sway of the four giant corporations that control the major TV news divisions: NBC, ABC, CBS and—if the Feds allow it—CNN. Two of these four corporations are defense contractors (both involved in nuclear production), while the other two are mammoth manufacturers of fun 'n' games. Thus we are the subjects of a *national entertainment state*, in which the news and much of our amusement come to us directly from the two most powerful industries in the United States. Glance up from the bottom of each quarter of the chart, and see why, say, Tom Brokaw might find it difficult to introduce stories critical of nuclear power. Or why it is unlikely ABC News will ever again do an exposé of Disney's practices (as *PrimeTime Live* did in 1990); or, indeed, why CNN—or any of the others—does not touch the biggest story of them all, i.e., the media monopoly itself.

Focused as it is on those colossi that control the TV news, this chart leaves out other giants: Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, John Malone's Tele-Communications Inc. and Sumner Redstone's Viacom, none of which are (yet) telejournalistic powers. Likewise, the octopus that is S.I. Newhouse has not one tentacle appearing here, since he mainly glides within the world of print, darkening magazines and publishing concerns instead of newscasts. There are also foreign players, like Sony (Columbia, Tri Star), whose holdings are not charted here.

We therefore need further maps of this contracting universe: more big pictures—and also local maps, so that folks everywhere will know who owns their daily paper, TV and radio stations, cable franchise and city magazine. We need industry-specific maps, to show who owns each culture industry: the newspapers, the magazines, the book business and music business, cable, radio and the movie studios—as well as the major online services that help us get around the Internet.

Such maps will point us toward the only possible escape from the impending blackout. They would suggest the true causes of those enormous ills that now dismay so many Americans: the universal sleaze and “dumbing down,” the flood-tide of corporate propaganda, the terminal inanity of U.S. politics. These have arisen not from any grand decline in national character, nor from the plotting of some Hebrew cabal but from the inevitable toxic influence of those few corporations that have monopolized our culture. The only way to solve the problem is to break their hold; and to that end the facts of media ownership must be made known to all. In short, we the people need a few good maps, because, as the man said, there must be some kind of way out of here.

Certainly the domination of our media by corporate profiteers is nothing new. Decades before Mr. Gingrich went to Washington, there were observers already decrying the censorious impact of mass advertising. The purveyors of “patent medicine”—mostly useless, often lethal—went unscathed by reporters through the twenties because that industry spent more than any other on print advertising (just like the tobacco industry a few years later). The electrical power industry attacked the concept of public ownership in an astonishing campaign of lies, half-truths and redbaiting that went on from 1919 to 1934. That propaganda drive entailed the outright purchase of newspapers (e.g., the Copley chain) and the establishment of trust-oriented stations for the NBC radio network.

Although the utilities' program was exposed, the corporate drive to eat the media was not halted by the New Deal. Indeed, as Robert McChesney tells us, the Communications Act of 1934 killed the soul of U.S. broadcasting, defining it forever as commercial. Thereafter, with ever fewer exceptions, radio and then TV were subject to the market-driven whims of the sponsor, who by the early sixties had on the whole made pap of both the news and

entertainment sold through the electronic media. Some of the brightest talents spoke out memorably against the drift: Edward R. Murrow scored the trivialization of TV news, and Rod Serling, before his exile to *The Twilight Zone*, publicly condemned the fatal softening of TV drama by the likes of U.S. Steel and BBD&O.

Bad as they often were, those earlier manipulations of the media were only a foretaste of what is happening now. Here no longer is a range of disparate industries, with only certain of them dangerously prey to corporate pressure, or to the warlike caprice of some Hearst, Luce or Northcliffe. What we have now, rather, is a culture gripped in every sector by an ever-tightening convergence of globe-trotting corporations, whose managers believe in nothing but “the market” *über alles*.

The time has come to free the media. Let's create a new, broad-based movement dedicated to an all-important mission: antitrust.

This new order started to get obvious in the spring of 1995, when the F.C.C. summarily let Rupert Murdoch off the hook for having fudged the actual foreign ownership of his concern (an Australian outfit, which Murdoch had not made clear to the busy regulators). The summer then saw ABC sucked into Disney, CBS sucked into Westinghouse, and Ted Turner's mini-empire slated for ingestion by Time Warner: a grand consolidation that the press, the White House, Congress and the F.C.C. have failed to question (although the F.T.C. is finally stirring).

With the mergers came some hints of how the new proprietors would henceforth use their journalists: Disney's ABC News apologizing to Philip Morris—a major TV advertiser, through Kraft Foods—for having told the truth, on a broadcast of *Day One*, about P.M.'s manipulation of nicotine levels in its cigarettes; and CBS's in-house counsel ordering the old newshounds at *60 Minutes* to bury an explosive interview with whistleblower Jeffrey Wigand about the addictive practices of Brown & Williamson.

Such moves portend the death of broadcast journalism, as does the radical cost-cutting now being dictated by the networks' owners. And yet some good seems also to have come out of this *annus horribilis* of big waivers, big mergers, big layoffs and big lies. Suddenly, the risks of media monopoly are now apparent not just to the usual uptight minority of activists and scholars but, more and more, to everyone. People want to know what's going on, and what to do about it. The time has therefore come to free the media by creating a new, broad-based movement dedicated to this all-important mission: antitrust.

Although it will certainly go to court, this movement must start with a civic project far more arduous than any spate of major lawsuits. In fact, there can be no such legal recourse yet, because there is no organized mass movement that would endow such actions with the proper standing. Since the bully days of Teddy Roosevelt, the drive against monopoly has always been initiated not by solitary lawyers but by an angry public. “The antitrust laws are enforced in one period and not enforced in another, and the reason is pure politics,” notes Charles Mueller, editor of the *Antitrust Law & Economics Review*. Such laws can take on the media trust, says Andrew Schwartzman of the Media Access Project, only when “the general public helps convince the prosecutors in the federal government that the future of

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democracy depends on freedom in the marketplace of ideas."

Thus this movement must start by getting out the word—and there's the rub. Our problem has no precedent, for what's monopolized today is no mere staple such as beef or oil but the very media whereby the problem could be solved. Indeed, the media trust suppresses information and debate on *all* monopolies. "You and I can't get the antitrust laws enforced," says Mueller, "and the reason we can't is that we don't have access to the media." To fight the trust directly, then, would be to resume the epic struggle that gave us our antitrust laws in the first place—one that the robber barons themselves soon halted by buying interests in the magazines that had been attacking them. With reformist monthlies like *McClure's* thus safely "Morganized," the muckrakers were quieted by 1912, as their vehicles were pulled into the same formation that now threatens to contain us all. Today's antitrust campaign will therefore have to be a thorough grass-roots effort—one that will work *around* the mainstream media so as to free them by and by.

This movement will depend on those idealists who still work within the media: those who would do a good job if they could, but who've been forced to compromise, and those working from the margins—the stalwarts of the alternative press and of groups like Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting. All should henceforth pay attention to developments within the different culture industries. The American Booksellers Association, for instance, filed an antitrust suit against Random House for illegally providing discounts to the national bookstore chains and retailers [see André Schiffrin, page 29]. Those in other industries should likewise make a fuss. With the help of independents in the film business, the Justice Department ought to take a look—again—at monopolistic practices in Hollywood. Creative Artists Agency, for instance, yearly packages a number of obscenely pricey movies for the studios, in each case demanding that the studio either use the agency's own stars, writer(s) and director—and pay them the salaries dictated by the agency—or take a hike. Since C.A.A. itself grabs the commissions on those salaries, its way of doing business represents a highly profitable conflict of interest.

That scam has also helped to jack up ticket prices for the rest of us—and the movies are a lot worse for the practice, which pairs up talents not because they might work beautifully together but just because they profit C.A.A. Likewise, the A.B.A.'s showdown with Random House has far broader implications, for the extinction of the independent bookstores could insure as well the disappearance of those titles that are not best sellers, and whose authors will not be up there trading ironies with David Letterman of Westinghouse, or grinning, between commercials, through a segment of GE's *Today Show*.

That the media trust costs everyone is a fact that this new movement must explain to everyone. The public, first of all, should be reminded that it owns the airwaves, and that the trust is therefore ripping everybody off—now more than ever, since those triumphant giants don't even pretend to compensate us with programs "in the public interest." Likewise, we should start discussing taxes on mass advertising. Such a tax, and the tolls on usage of the air-

waves, would yield enough annual revenues at least to pay for public broadcasting, whose managers would then no longer have to try to soothe the breasts of savage Congressmen, or sell out for the dubious largesse of Mobil, Texaco and other "underwriters." In 1994, according to *Advertising Age*, corporations spent a staggering \$150 billion on national advertising. That year, it cost just \$1.8 billion to pay the full tab for PBS and NPR.

And yet, to most Americans, the economic arguments against the trust may matter less than its offenses against taste. Grossed out by what they see and hear, a great majority have had their unease exploited by the likes of Pat Buchanan and Bob Dole, and ignored, or mocked, by many on the left. This is a mistake. The antitrust movement should acknowledge and explain the *cultural* consequences of monopoly. While the right keeps scapegoating "Hollywood" (*a k a* "the Jews"), this movement must stick to the facts, and point out that the media's trashiness is a predictable result of the dominion of those few huge corporate owners.

Thus our aim is certainly not censorship, which is the tacit goal of rightist demagogues like Ralph Reed and the Rev. Donald Wildmon. The purpose, rather, is a solution wholly constitutional—and, for that matter, sanely capitalistic. We would reintroduce a pleasurable diversity into the corporate monoculture. Some crap there always is, and always

The constitutional and sanely capitalistic way to fight mass sleaze is an infusion of diversity into the corporate monoculture.

ought to be: It is the overwhelming volume of such stuff that is the danger here inside the magic kingdom. Where just a few huge entities compete, ever more intently, for the same vast blocs of viewers, and where the smaller players are not allowed to vary what we're offered, the items on the screens and shelves will, necessarily, have been concocted to appeal to what is worst in us. It is this process, and not some mysterious upsurge of mass barbarism, that will explain the domination of the mainstream by the likes of Murdoch, Jenny Jones, Rush Limbaugh, Judith Regan, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Howard Stern, Charles Barkley, Gordon Liddy, Butt-head and Bob Grant.

Although, thus far, the right alone has decried the media's nastiness, when it comes to antitrust, those pseudo-populists would never walk the walk, since they themselves are part of the behemoth: Limbaugh's TV show belongs to Gannett/Multimedia, Pat Robertson's Family Channel is partly owned by TCI, and Bob Dole—despite his mock attack on Time Warner—has done his best to give the giants all they want. Those on the right would not dismantle the monopoly, which they would like to run themselves (and which to some extent they do already). It is therefore the left's responsibility to guide this movement, since on this issue it is actually much closer to the people.

Such an effort will require that the left stop being too hip for its own good, and start to honor the concerns of the appalled majority. "Two-thirds of the public thinks TV shows have a negative impact on the country," notes *U.S. News & World Report* in a major poll released in April, "and huge majorities believe TV contributes to social problems like violence, divorce, teen pregnancy and the decline of family values." This is no hick prejudice but a sound mass response to the routine experience of all-pervasive titillation.

Human Rights Watch International Film Festival
 Walter Reade Theater
 165 West 65th Street
 New York
 June 12 - June 27
 1996
 Museum of Tolerance
 Los Angeles
 June 29 - July 3
 1996

The Human Rights Watch International Film Festival is the only one in the world exclusively devoted to human rights. The 1996 program presents works from an extraordinary cast of international directors.

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"Chronicling Coexistence", a touring program of dramas and documentaries from Israeli and Palestinian filmmakers which have been made since the historic 1993 signing of the Palestinian-Israeli Peace Accords.

"Questionable Punishment" a series of films on the death penalty, U.S. chain gangs, and political prisoners.

"Elections and Democracy" featuring the documentaries **"Days of Democracy"**, on Egyptian women running for office in 1995, and **"Ollie's Army"** on the 1994 Senate Campaign of Oliver North in Virginia.

The **"Dames Bond"** Program features films by women and addressing women's rights around the world. Headlining this year's series are **"Devil's Children"** and **"Calling the Ghosts"** which document rape as a war crime in both Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina respectively.

Additionally the Festival will host the first New York **retrospective** of the works of internationally acclaimed South Korean director **Park Kwang-Su**, acknowledged as the leader of the "New Cinema" in South Korea. The **Opening Night Benefit Gala** on June 10th will feature the New York Premiere of renowned American director John Sayles extraordinary new film **"Lone Star."**

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"The greatest anxieties are expressed by women and by those who are religious, but," the pollsters found, "the anger is 'overwhelming and across the board.'"

Of course, there are some deep antipathies between the left and those uneasy "huge majorities"—some out there don't want to be disturbed by *anything*, and the general audience may never go for feminism, and may forever cheer for shows like Desert Storm. Nevertheless, we have the obligation to make common cause with the offended—for what offends both them *and* us has all alike been worsened by the downward pressure of the trust. The ubiquitous soft porn, the gangsta manners, the shock jocks and the now-obligatory shouting of the F-word are all products of the same commercial oligopoly that is also whitening out the news, exploiting women, celebrating gross consumption, glorifying guns and demonizing all the wretched of the earth.

There are pertinent movements under way. In early March, there was an important and well-attended Media & Democracy Congress in San Francisco, organized by the Institute for Alternative Journalism, whose purpose was to unify the forces of the progressive media to fight the trust before it can rigidify beyond democracy. Soon after, in St. Louis, the first convention of the Cultural Environment Movement was held; founded by George Gerbner, the C.E.M. is committed to the broadest, toughest possible campaign for media reform.

The arousal of mass interest would raise possibilities for major legal action. The F.C.C. could be served with a class-action suit for its neglect of the antitrust laws—as could President Clinton for his failure "to see that [those] laws are faithfully executed." It might be feasible to sue them on First Amendment grounds. Although the giants themselves cannot be nailed for censorship, the movement could, says antitrust attorney Michael Meyerson, sue the U.S. government for collusion in the corporate move against our First Amendment rights.

While such distant possibilities await broader public support, some current cases show what could be done. Time Warner's acquisition of the Turner Broadcasting System has not yet won the blessing of the F.T.C., and there have been some strong petitions to deny the agency's approval. [For other steps, see Jeffrey A. Chester and Anthony Wright, page 21.] Looking further ahead, we must begin undoing what the media trust itself accomplished through the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which was devised to rush us in the wrong direction (and which the media—both mainstream and alternative—largely failed to examine). For a start, we might consider Chester's notion of an eventual move to force the four colossi to divest themselves of their beleaguered news divisions. For P.R. purposes, GE (say) could still boast its affiliation with NBC News—a most impressive civic contribution—but the annual budget for the news would come primarily from the same sort of trust fund, based on corporate taxes, that would pay for PBS.

Right now, however, what we need to do is tell the people who owns what. This campaign of public information must involve the whole alternative press, as well as unions, churches, schools and advocacy groups—and progressives on the Internet, which is still a medium of democratic promise, although that promise is also at risk. Indeed, the same gigantic players that control the elder media are planning shortly to absorb the Internet, which could be transformed from a thriving common wilderness into an immeasur-

able de facto cyberpark for corporate interests, with all the dissident voices exiled to sites known only to the activists and other cranks (such renovation is, in fact, one major purpose of the recent telecommunications bill). Therefore, to expect the new technology to free us from the trust is to succumb to a utopian delusion [see Andrew L. Shapiro, "Street Corners in Cyberspace," July 3, 1995].

Which is another way of saying that there is no substitute for actual democracy—which cannot work unless the people know what's going on. And so, before we raise the proper legal questions and debate the legislative possibilities, we need simply to teach everyone, ourselves included, that this whole failing culture is an oversold dead end, and that there might be a way out of it. ■

On That Chart

We asked people in the media, academic and public interest worlds to comment on the issues raised by the media centerfold discussed in Mark Crispin Miller's article. Their responses follow.

—The Editors



James Fallows

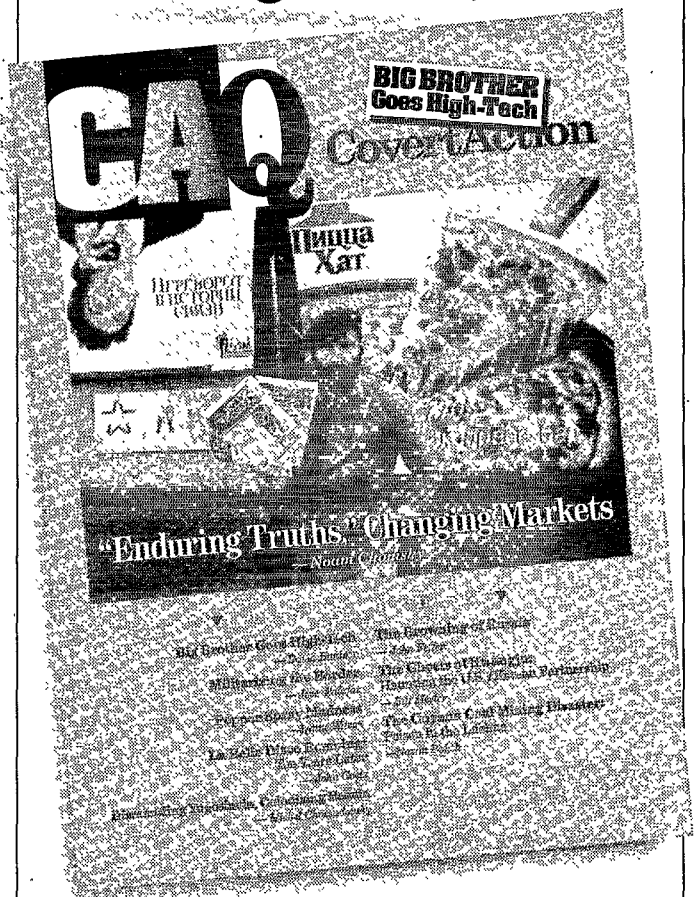
Washington editor, The Atlantic Monthly; author, Breaking the News.

The problem with the media structure so wonderfully portrayed by your chart is not the identity of the ultimate owners—Westinghouse, Disney, GE and so on. The more basic concern is the conversion of the news business to just another corporate operation, where whoever is in charge must be as driven by the demands of the financial market as their counterparts in the banking and steel-making and fast-food industries.

Journalism has always been a business, but until now it has been sheltered from the relentless earnings pressure that affects big, publicly traded corporations. Until the past decade or so we had not experienced the news as a mainly corporate undertaking. Family owners wanted to make money, but they did not need to make the "prevailing market return" on this quarter. They did not need to worry that financial analysts would mark them down, or that mutual fund managers would start unloading their stock, if their immediate earnings fell below the industry average—or below what was available from investments anywhere else in the financial universe, from a shirt factory in Thailand to the latest Internet start-up. Now they have exactly such worries—and must respond as the new, corporatized *Los Angeles Times* did when closing *New York Newsday*. The paper was still capable of making money. It just couldn't make *enough*.

Theoretically, it is possible that this bracing market pressure will bring us some improved version of the news, as international competition spurred Detroit to bring us better cars. *The New York Times*, for instance, has responded to pressure in its home market by developing a nationwide niche audience, so that people who want a first-rate daily paper can now find one in most parts of the country. Fund managers might decide (we're back in the

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