


MEDIA EDUCATION
FOUNDATION
STUDY GUIDE



Challenging media

RICH MEDIA, POOR DEMOCRACY

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RICH MEDIA, POOR DEMOCRACY

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NOTE TO TEACHERS

This study guide is designed to help you engage and manage the information presented in this video with your students. Given that it can be difficult to teach visual content – and difficult for students to recall detailed information from videos after viewing them – the intention here is to give you a tool to help your students slow down and deepen their thinking about the specific issues this video addresses. With this in mind, we’ve structured the guide so that you have the option of focusing in depth on one section of the video at a time. We’ve also set it up to help you stay close to the video’s main line of argument as it unfolds. The structure of the guide therefore mirrors the structure of the video, moving through each of the video’s sections with a series of key summary points, questions, and assignments specific to that section.

Previewing Discussion Starters are designed to inspire preliminary discussion about the issues the video addresses prior to viewing.

Key Points provide a concise and comprehensive summary of each section of the video. They are designed to make it easier for you and your students to recall the details of the video during class discussions, and as a reference point for students as they work on assignments.

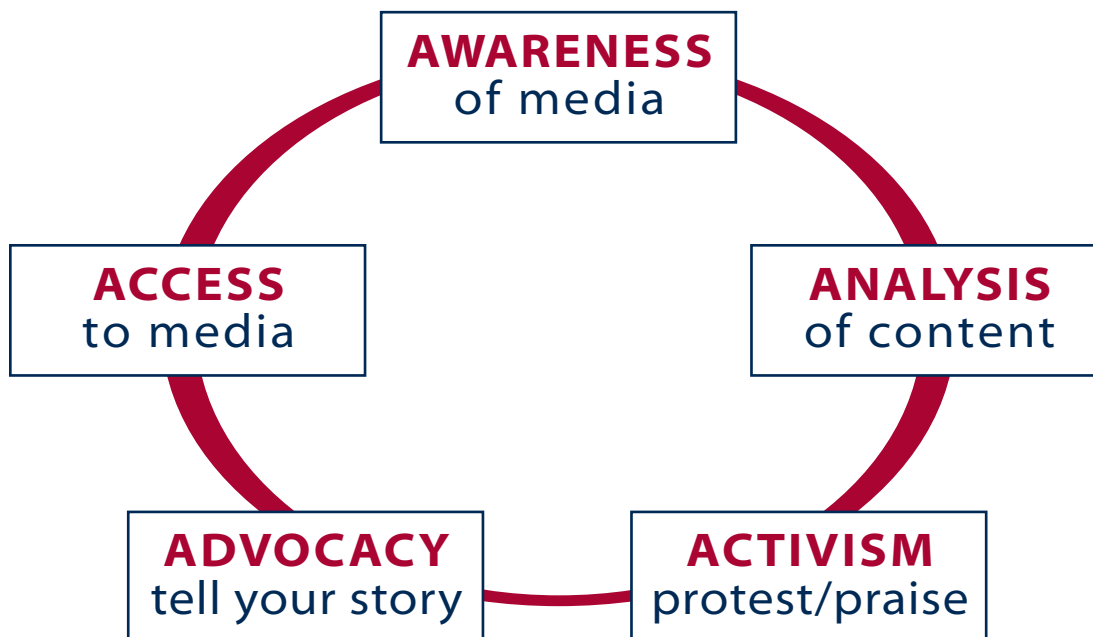
Questions for Discussion & Writing provide a series of questions designed to help you review and clarify material for your students; to encourage students to reflect critically on this material during class discussions; and to prompt and guide their written reactions to the video before and after these discussions. These questions can therefore be used in different ways: as guideposts for class discussion, as a framework for smaller group discussion and presentations, or as self-standing, in-class writing assignments (*i.e. as prompts for “free-writing” or in-class reaction papers in which students are asked to write spontaneously and informally while the video is fresh in their mind*).

Assignments for each section encourage students to engage the video in more depth – by conducting research, working on individual and group projects, putting together presentations, and composing formal essays. These assignments are designed, at base, to challenge students to show command of the material presented in the video, to think critically and independently about this material from a number of different perspectives, and to develop and defend their own point of view on the issues at stake.

USING THIS VIDEO IN THE CLASSROOM

- » View the video prior to showing it to your students.
- » Review the study guide and choose which exercises you will use with your students.
- » Use the previewing activities to help your students prepare for the ideas presented by the video.
- » Encourage *active listening*. Because the content of this video is likely to elicit emotional responses from the students, it is important that the students engage with each other in ways that ensure everybody has the opportunity both to speak and to be listened to. It is advised that you set guidelines or norms to ways to “actively listen” in advance of classroom discussions. Check out MEF’s handout, *Techniques for Active Listening*. (<http://www.mediaed.org/handouts/pdf/ActiveListening.pdf>)
- » Have the students keep a journal. It will be an effective place for them to explore their own attitudes and opinions and to record their observations about the media.
- » Review and discuss the handout *How to be a Critical Media Viewer*. (<http://www.mediaed.org/handouts/pdf/CriticalViewing.pdf>)
- » Incorporate activism and advocacy into your media literacy study. They are an important part of empowering students.

THE MEDIA LITERACY CIRCLE OF EMPOWERMENT¹



THE MEDIA LITERACY CIRCLE OF EMPOWERMENT EXPLAINED

AWARENESS

Students learn about the pervasiveness of the media in their lives.

ANALYSIS

Students discuss the forms and contents of the media's various messages as well as the intent of most media to persuade an audience.

ACTIVISM

Students develop their own opinions about the negative and positive effects of the media and decide to do something about it – this can be in the form of praise for healthy media, protest of unhealthy media, or development of campaigns to educate others with regard to the media, to change media messages, etc.

ADVOCACY

Students learn how to work with media and use their own media to develop and publicize messages that are healthy, constructive, and all too often ignored by our society.

ACCESS

Students gain access to the media – radio, newspaper, internet, television, etc. – to spread their own message. This in turn leads to further awareness of the media and how it works, which leads to a deeper analysis and so forth.

1. Diagram and explanation adopted from E.D.A.P.'s GO GIRLS! Curriculum, (c) 1999 (<http://www.edap.org/gogirls.html>)

OVERVIEW

This time, we were told, the revolution would indeed be televised. In the years and months leading up to 1996, a collection of self-styled visionaries – including the Democratic president, a bipartisan majority of Congressional leaders, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), the CEOs of national and global media empires, a swarm of media industry lobbyists, and the influential editorial boards of most of the mainstream press – proclaimed they saw what their critics failed to see: The Telecommunications Act of 1996 would liberate the airwaves from the heavy hand of big government and free the market to work its entrepreneurial and democratic magic. The result would be nothing short of revolutionary. Newly tuned to the rhythms of the digital age, the airwaves would shake off the dust of radio-age regulations and burst into the coming millennium with a kaleidoscopic range of exciting new channels, viewer choices, and alternative voices. Media companies, free at last to compete, would unleash creative waves of diverse programming and cutting-edge technologies at lower cost to the consumer, in the process reinvigorating the marketplace of ideas and reviving political culture and democracy.

This was the theory and the pitch, the subject of uncritical and celebratory media coverage at the time. It remains the rhetorical fuel of public relations efforts on behalf of media conglomerates to this day. *Rich Media, Poor Democracy*, featuring influential media scholar and activist Robert McChesney, tells a dramatically different story.

McChesney, along with media critic Mark Crispin Miller, surveys the contemporary media landscape through the lens of constitutional democracy to correct the myopic corporate vision of these telecommunications visionaries. Cutting against the grain of self-interested mainstream media reporting on the media industry, the video uncovers the mostly uncovered story behind the push for so-called “deregulatory” policies. The baseline motive of the video: to consider the consequences of these policies and the media system they have created for free speech and democracy. The result is a devastating examination of how and why we have ended up with precisely the opposite of what was promised in 1996: the radical re-regulation of the media industry at the expense of the public interest, the command and control of the public airwaves and public discourse by a handful of corporate empires, and the judicial and legislative triumph of corporate speech over the free speech rights of individuals – in short, a creatively flat and flattening media system averse to competition, entrepreneurship, and the democratic interests of the true owners of the airwaves, the American people.

While McChesney argues that our democracy and the public interest are being corrupted, he also looks to the future with determination and hope. As he reminds us throughout, the media system we live with today is neither natural nor inevitable, but the evolving product of ongoing human decisions – of policies enacted by elected representatives who survive by responding not only to the highest bidder, but also to the loudest voice. The recent storm of public protest against further proposed FCC de-regulations could not have made this more clear: when people understand the meaning and crucial importance of telecommunications policy, they do not hesitate to make their representatives understand the meaning of democracy. *Rich Media, Poor Democracy* is designed to further this kind of understanding. Navigating the labyrinthine complexity of communications policy with clarity and passion, it gives cause to believe that next time around the revolution of the airwaves may well be democratic, and democratically televised, after all.

PRE-VIEWING EXERCISES

- 1.** The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution guarantees the right to free speech. It also guarantees freedom of the press. In your view, do you see any circumstances in which the right to free speech might interfere with freedom of the press?
- 2.** Who do the airwaves belong to? Who is in charge of them? What rules have traditionally been in place to manage and govern their use?
- 3.** What, in your view, is the relationship between information and democracy?
- 4.** Do you believe the mainstream media in the U.S. serve the interests of democracy? Explain yourself with specific examples.
- 5.** In your view, has the increasing number of available channels over the years brought diversity to the airwaves? Diversity of content? Diversity of perspective? A freer flow of information?
- 6.** What's your opinion of news coverage in the United States? On what do you base this opinion?
- 7.** Do you feel the American people are well informed about the issues that matter most in their lives? Why or why not?
- 8.** How much media do you consume a day? Be sure to factor in all forms of media.
- 9.** Do you consider yourself well informed about the issues and decisions that stand to have the greatest impact on your life, and on the lives of those you care most about?
- 10.** What does "FCC" stand for? What is it? What does it do?

INTRODUCTION

KEY POINTS

- » Given that we live in a society immersed in media, in which the average person spends 10-12 hours a day consuming media of one form or another, it is vital to understand not only media content, but the nature of the industry that produces it.
- » Understanding the media industry begins with understanding the difference between the political rhetoric and actual meaning of “deregulation.”
- » The “deregulation” of the media industry, ongoing for years and radically accelerated by the Telecommunications Act of 1996, was supposed to transform the airwaves into a freer, more open, more democratic space.
- » Instead these changes have delivered the opposite: not a blooming garden place of diverse ideas and healthy competition, but a monopolistic desert of commercial conformity.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & WRITING

- 1.** How might the nature of the media industry – the way it’s funded, monitored, and structured – shape the content it produces? What is the nature of the media industry? Think about this by comparing our media system to other possible ways to structure and run a media system. And consider how these differences might create differences in the kind of media content that gets produced.
- 2.** Before moving more deeply into McChesney’s analysis in the rest of the video, what is your sense of what he means in his introduction by “deregulation”? What definitions would you give for the terms “deregulation” and “regulation”? Deregulation and regulation by whom? For whom? Finally, how do you think deregulation and/or regulation have shaped our media system over time, leading to what we have today?
- 3.** Do you agree that the media landscape today features a diversity of viewpoints? Alternative points of view? A free flow of information? If so, describe, with specifics, the range of information and content you see in mainstream media. If not, give specific examples of viewpoints or content that you feel get marginalized or left out.

WHO IS SUMNER REDSTONE?

KEY POINTS

- » Understanding media requires understanding the nature of media ownership.
- » We cannot fully grasp media content without first grasping the institutional nature of the industry that produces it – especially the logic of corporate enterprise that flows from the top and demands that programming, whether light entertainment or breaking news coverage, makes as much money as possible.
- » The U.S. media system is a three-tier structure dominated at the top level by a small number of commercial media giants.
- » The media industry break down this way: the top tier is occupied by a handful of global media conglomerates (*Viacom, Vivendi, Disney, AOL-Time Warner, SONY, Newscorporation*); the second tier by a larger, but still select, grouping of cable companies (*e.g. Comcast*) and newspaper chains (*e.g. New York Times*); the bottom tier by a much larger grouping of hundreds of thousands of companies that fill local niche markets by doing the less profitable work the first and second-tier companies have little interest in.
- » The key to understanding this structure – to understanding the very nature of the media industry and the government policies that have created it – is to understand that in reality the industry is dominated and shaped by the economic power of a few top-tier conglomerates, even though on paper there are hundreds of thousands of media companies.
- » As the FCC considers relaxing restrictions on mergers, the potential exists for power to be concentrated in fewer and fewer hands.
- » Media consolidation and conglomeration result when the big companies buy up the smaller companies to expand market share, maximize profits, and eliminate competition.
- » It is in the interest of big media companies to expand their empires, to gobble up other companies and grow as big as possible, because it allows for what the industry calls “synergy”: the ability of a conglomerate to cross-promote, cross-produce, and cross-advertise its content across a variety of its own channels and stores and businesses.
- » This ability to dominate and saturate huge swaths of the airwaves and public space creates both the conditions and the need for the blockbuster: because conglomerates are so massive, they need the massive profits that only blockbuster films can deliver; and because they own so many TV channels, movie screens, video stores, fast-food restaurants and other ways to promote and distribute films, they minimize their risk when investing the massive amounts of money required to produce and promote blockbuster films.
- » This guaranteed cultural penetration in turn drives smaller media outlets out of the market.
- » The recent rise to dominance of these top-tier media giants is not simply the natural end-result of healthy market competition, but of the desire to eliminate healthy competition.
- » Government policies that deregulated the industry and allowed companies to merge in previously illegal ways, new technologies that have facilitated the merging of different media segments, and the basic logic – rather than the myth –of capitalism have combined to transform the industry.
- » The myth of capitalism is that it is based on competition, and assuring competition. The corporate culture we have today is based not on competition, but on smashing and eliminating competition. The distinction is crucial when the corporations in question are those who own the public airwaves, and therefore the main sources of information in a democracy.

WHO IS SUMNER REDSTONE?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & WRITING

1. What are the key distinctions between the companies represented on each of the three tiers of the media industry described by McChesney?
2. How does McChesney respond to the claim by many in the media industry that in the wake of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, there are hundreds of thousands of different media outlets?
3. According to McChesney, what is media conglomeration and consolidation? And why is media consolidation desirable for corporations?
4. What's meant in the video by "synergy"? What are the four elements McChesney describes that make it work?
5. Can you give some contemporary examples of synergy in action?
6. How do blockbuster films fit into the corporate dynamics of synergy?
7. How does McChesney respond to the argument that capitalism – and therefore the deregulation of markets – is based on an ideal of competition and entrepreneurship?
8. In your opinion, do the airwaves present an especially important case when it comes to assuring competition and diversity? If so, on what grounds? If not, why not?
9. What support do you see in commercial media content – in coverage of news or other kinds of programming – for McChesney's claim that "the logic of corporate enterprise" that "flows from the top" shapes what ends up getting produced, how it gets produced, and what doesn't get produced?

ASSIGNMENTS

The following exercises can work as individual or group projects.

1. Go to the Media Ownership Chart featured on the website of *The Nation* magazine, www.thenation.com/special/bigten.html. The chart lists the ten largest media conglomerates and their holdings. Click on each one to see the details up close.

Also see the media ownership breakdown provided on the website for the PBS Frontline documentary "Merchants of Cool" (www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/giants/).

After reading through this information, choose one mega-parent company to focus on. Here's your task: You are asked by Robert McChesney to devise your own plan to sell the Media Education Foundation video *Rich Media, Poor Democracy* by taking advantage of "synergy." There's only one requirement: achieve total market saturation. Write up this plan, and explain how and why it will work.

2. Prepare to represent one side in a debate on the following proposition:

"Our present media system reveals that corporate power can be a threat to the American way of life: to democracy and free speech, but also – ironically – to the capitalist ideals of competition, free enterprise and entrepreneurship."

Be sure to back up your position with a clear summary of how the media system is presently structured. Provide clear definitions of what you mean by "capitalism," "free speech," "democracy," "competition," "free enterprise," and "entrepreneurship." Be sure to support your argument with specific examples from the video and other sources, and to account for the best opposition arguments to strengthen your own case.

Sources:

See Mark Crispin Miller on media ownership:
www.thenation.com/doc.mhtml?i=20020107&s=miller

See Thom Hartmann on Thomas Jefferson's fight against monopoly and corporate power:
www.thomhartmann.com/jefferson.shtml

WHO IS SUMNER REDSTONE?

See the corporate website of Clear Channel Radio for criticisms of government regulation of “free enterprise,” including the CEO’s statement that proposed FCC regulation is “unconstitutional”:

www.clearchannel.com

See the FCC website for statements by Commissioner Michael Powell and others about the “free market” as the best safeguard against corruption of democracy and the public interest:

www.fcc.gov

WHO GAVE THE AIRWAVES AWAY ?

KEY POINTS

- » **Myth:** The media system arose organically as the natural product of private entrepreneurial vision and heroism; the government simply comes in from the outside to meddle and interfere with this healthy, competitive state of nature.
- » **Reality:** The media system is the product of the government policies that created it.
- » Given that the airwaves are public, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) was created in 1934 to represent the public interest – to monitor the allocation of licenses to broadcast on the public airwaves.
- » The theory is this: we, as the owners of the public airwaves, give monopoly licenses to private, commercial companies to broadcast on very scarce and valuable channels in each community, and in exchange these private companies are allowed to maximize profit so long as they also give something back to the community, and serve the public interest.
- » One of the key functions of the FCC, as the publicly-financed voice of the people in media matters, is to make sure that private media companies hold up their end of this public-private partnership, to assure that they use the space and power they've been given responsibly.
- » Over time, the FCC has proven powerless to curb the power of commercial media, powerless to assure that the primary means of communication in a democracy serve the interests of democracy.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & WRITING

1. What does the title of this section mean? How can the “airwaves” be “given away”? What are the “airwaves” anyway? Whose are they to begin with? Why? And who has the power to turn them into gifts?
2. According to McChesney, what is the myth of where our media system came from?
3. How is government’s role portrayed in this myth?
4. In reality, according to McChesney, what was the government’s role in the creation of our media system?
5. Which specific pieces of legislation have shaped the media system over time?
6. When and why was the FCC established?
7. Why were broadcasters expected – and required – to include programming that would serve the public interest? On what grounds was such a requirement instituted?
8. What kinds of programming do you think should be broadcast in the “public interest”?
9. According to McChesney, has the FCC been doing its job? What is the primary reason he gives for the way the FCC operates today?
10. In this section, McChesney points to a fundamental conflict between commercial interests and the public interest, between private interests and the interests of democracy. Talk about this potential conflict. And give some specific examples of where you might see it being played out in today’s media.

ASSIGNMENT

While one of the founding missions of the FCC was to assure that broadcasters served the public interest, there are different philosophies about the best way to accomplish this. On one side, there are those who believe that when the market is free of “government regulation”, the people – and democracy – are best served. On the other side are those who believe that the market, and media companies, must be regulated in the interests of democracy and the people if democracy and the public are to be meaningfully served.

WHO GAVE THE AIRWAVES AWAY ?

Summarize and draw out the differences between these two philosophies, then weigh in with your own point of view – in a paper or a presentation – in response to this question: How can the FCC best serve the public interest?

Base your analysis on the following sources:

- » For the so-called “de-regulatory side,” see speeches by FCC chairman Michael Powell (www.fcc.gov/Speeches/Powell/spmkp806.html) and FCC Commissioner Kathleen Abernathy (www.fcc.gov/Speeches/Abernathy/2001/spkqa108.html).
- » For the “regulation” side, see a statement on by FCC Commissioner Michael Copps (www.fcc.gov/Speeches/Copps/Statements/2001/stmjc121.html) and an article from *The Nation* magazine by media activist John Nichols, entitled “FCC rejects public interest” (www.alternet.org/story.html?StoryID=16076).

Be sure – in your paper or your talk – to do the following:

- a. Summarize the key ideas and beliefs that seem to inform each side of this debate as articulated in these documents.
- b. Compare and contrast these ideas and beliefs so that the differences are clear.
- c. Analyze these differences from your own perspective.
- d. Craft an argument that advances and supports your own point of view on this question.

WELCOME TO THE REVOLUTION?

KEY POINTS

- » The Telecommunications Act of 1996 incorporated Congress’s vision of communication in the digital age, laying out the basic values that would guide the FCC for the next two generations.
- » With little debate, despite the magnitude of the issues at stake, Congress passed the law and hailed it, with industry leaders, as a victory for democracy: the “deregulation” of the media industry would foment a new wave of competition, which would lead to lower prices and higher quality service, eliminating the need for government regulation on behalf of the public interest.
- » The baseline selling point here was that the market would regulate the media industry better than the government.
- » What the rhetoric of deregulation missed – and continues to miss in debates today – is that the very term “deregulation” is a misnomer, a factual and historical distortion.
- » Deregulation is commonly defined as liberating the market from government checks and controls, allowing private interests to compete without interference from those who would attempt to misguidedly “regulate” or temper the excesses of the market to assure that the public interest – and capitalism itself – is served by the healthy and competitive flow of information, ideas, debate, and capital.
- » In reality, then, there is no such thing as “deregulation,” if deregulation is taken to mean freeing the market from government attempts to regulate it. With regard to the media industry, what’s really meant by “deregulation” is re-regulation – a switch from government regulation of the public airwaves on behalf of the public owners of these airwaves, to government regulation of the public airwaves on behalf of the private companies that broadcast on these airwaves.
- » Framed this way, the effects of the Telecommunications Act make more sense: the immediate re-regulation of the telephone industry and the radio industry on behalf of private interests has resulted in a shrinking number of companies in both industries – therefore less competition and less freedom for the public to make choices.
- » The fundamental and clear change is this: more private power, less public accountability. Before the “deregulations” of 1996, we had a handful of companies that were regulated in the public interest; we now have an even a smaller number of companies that are even less regulated in the public interest.
- » The result with radio has been especially disastrous; the easing of ownership restrictions has effected precisely the opposite of what was promised: fully two-thirds of radio stations have been sold since the Telecommunications Act eased restrictions on how many stations a company could own, so that a handful of companies now own most radio stations.
- » Radio, previously the most democratic and creative of our media, has been transformed into our most regimented, formulaic, standardized, hyper-commercialized medium.
- » There is little doubt that a broad cross-section of the American public is dissatisfied with radio, and media generally – but lacking clear information about the nature of these decisions, the potential political power of this dissatisfaction pales in comparison with the influence of corporate lobbies on legislators wielded behind closed doors.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & WRITING

1. How was the Telecommunications Act of 1996 sold to the American people? What specific results were supposed to emerge from its passage?
2. How does the reality of the media landscape today differ from these initial predictions? And why?
3. Why, according to McChesney, is the term “deregulation” a misnomer?

WELCOME TO THE REVOLUTION?

4. McChesney argues that the Telecommunications Act was never intended to truly deregulate the media industry – but to re-regulate it. What does he mean by this? Re-regulation by whom, and on behalf of whom?
5. What specific changes enacted by the Telecommunications Act of 1996 led to changes in how the telephone and radio industry operate?
6. According to McChesney, what threats to democracy have been posed by the alleged “deregulation” of media enacted by this law? What observations and facts can you offer to support or refute this argument?

ASSIGNMENTS

1. Clear Channel Radio, the largest operator of radio stations in the United States, owns more than 1200 stations. This assignment calls for you to research this media giant and to examine its reaction to recent FCC rulings designed to limit media ownership. Follow the research guidelines below, take notes on what you find, and prepare to write up or present your research.

The research guidelines:

- a. Research the history of this company by looking at the timeline it provides on its website (www.clearchannel.com/ci_oh.php). Note its growth from 1972 to the present, with particular attention to what happened following passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996. See also the statement by CEO John Hogan (www.clearchannel.com/radio/) describing how Clear Channel believes in and furthers “diversity” and local quality.
- b. With this bit of research in mind, see the recent statement by the FCC explaining how and why it decided to set some limits on how many radio stations can be owned by conglomerates like Clear Channel (www.clearchannel.com/documents/news/20030602_Corp_FCCRuling.pdf).
- c. Next, read Clear Channel’s reaction to this decision (which it characterized as a “big mistake” and a threat to democracy and the United States Constitution) in two statements – one criticizing the FCC for limiting its ability to own as many radio stations as it wants (www.clearchannel.com/documents/press_releases/20030602_Corp_FCCStatement.pdf); the other criticizing the U.S. Senate for a subsequent action designed to further limit radio ownership (www.clearchannel.com/documents/press_releases/20030619_Corp_SCC.pdf).
- d. Finish up your research by reading the “Issues Update” on media ownership, regulation, and the FCC provided on the Clear Channel website: (www.clearchannel.com/documents/press_releases/20030602_Corp_FCCIssuesUpdate.pdf).

2. Complete the research above, then write up – or prepare to present – a response to this question:

Did the FCC and the Senate make a “big mistake” in deciding to limit Clear Channel’s “freedom” to own as many radio stations as it wants?

Be sure to report what you find in the documents above, and to examine them in light of the arguments advanced in this section of the video. In other words, use the key points of this section to assess both the FCC ruling and the reaction by Clear Channel as you formulate your own response to the question of whether the FCC and Senate made a mistake or not. Be sure to focus on what the FCC and Senate decisions seem to have been designed to accomplish, why Clear Channel seems to be in disagreement with them, and your interpretation of all of this.

BUT WHAT ABOUT THE FIRST AMENDMENT?

KEY POINTS

- » The Founders understood the centrality of information to democracy and democratic theory: that to have a healthy democracy, you have to have a healthy, independent, and vibrant journalism to check power and the status quo in the public interest.
- » No freedom of speech and the press and no informed public – no meaningful democracy.
- » Journalism in a democracy has three basic and necessary functions: **1)** to provide an accounting of people in power and those with designs on power; **2)** to provide and ensure a diversity of opinions on important issues so that citizens can form their own opinions; and **3)** to check facts, assure for accuracy, and point out lies.
- » These basic functions have been undermined with the slow erosion of the necessary border between the work of editors and reporters on one side, and the interests of owners and advertisers on the other.
- » The result is a fundamental clash between the commercial base of media, and the basic responsibilities of professional journalism – as autonomous, independent journalism no longer makes fiscal sense given the pressure commercial news organizations face to maximize profits.
- » The Constitutional First Amendment guarantee of free speech and a free press has been fundamentally compromised, as news media have become the province of big corporations and wealthy owners in increasingly monopolistic markets.
- » The First Amendment was formulated as a social right: the right of citizens to have access to a free press.
- » This principle has been eroded by a series of court decisions that have interpreted the First Amendment on behalf of corporate “speech” – in this view, the right of owners and investors to control journalism without interference trumps the right of journalists and editors to do what they want without interference.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & WRITING

1. What is the role of information – and therefore journalism – in a democracy? In your view, can a democracy exist when the central means of communication are owned by a handful of corporations that control the flow of information and viewpoints?
2. What’s the difference, in your view, between the traditionally conservative argument that totalitarian control of the airwaves by the government poses a fundamental danger to democracy – and the argument McChesney makes that the total control of the airwaves by a few corporations does precisely the same thing?
3. Is there anything in McChesney’s critique of corporate dominance of the airwaves that implies he supports government dominance? What distinction do you think he would make between totalitarian control of the media – whether by government or corporations – and the democratization of the airwaves? Be sure to be specific here to back up your point of view.
4. According to McChesney, what are the three basic functions of journalism in a democracy?
5. How and why have these functions been eroded? Why does McChesney say it no longer makes sense to cultivate and pursue the traditional democratic goals of professional journalism? And what evidence can you cite from your own experience of media to support or refute McChesney’s claim?
6. In what specific ways does the commercial nature of media clash with the ideals of professional journalism?
7. What is McChesney’s interpretation of the First Amendment? How does it differ from the interpretation handed down by the courts over the past few years?
8. Do you feel that what courts have called “corporate speech” is more important to protect and guarantee than the free speech rights of people? How do the two differ?

BUT WHAT ABOUT THE FIRST AMENDMENT?

9. When might protecting one of these two kinds of speech infringe on the rights of the other kind – and where would you draw the line? As you think about this, be sure to consider the specifically democratic motives behind the Constitution and the First Amendment.

ASSIGNMENTS

1. Do some research into how the commercial nature of media might shape how mainstream media cover – or fail to cover – certain issues. The website for the media watchdog group FAIR (*Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting*) features a collection of articles (www.fair.org/media-woes/advertiser.html) examining this phenomenon. Prepare a written report – or a presentation – on this topic with examples from some of these articles, and from your own analysis of news coverage.

2. Do some research into the First Amendment and how it has been interpreted in ways that have benefited corporate media consolidation and what has been called “corporate speech”. Then prepare a paper or a presentation in response to this question: Is corporate speech free speech?

A good place to start researching is the website of Free Press (www.mediareform.net). See especially the section “Judicial Front,” featuring links to the following sections:

- a. Corporate Reform (www.mediareform.net/issue.php?id=anticorporate)
- b. First Amendment (www.mediareform.net/issue.php?id=firstamendment)
- c. Legal Challenges (www.mediareform.net/issue.php?id=legal).

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE NEWS?

KEY POINTS

- » Given that our media are themselves corporations, it should come as no surprise that journalistic autonomy and dissenting voices have virtually disappeared from mainstream news coverage.
- » There is little to no business sense in encouraging the autonomy and independence of journalists given the corporate structure of media: It makes far more sense for owners and shareholders to hold their news divisions, like their television and film divisions, to a fierce accounting that demands profits over investing resources for controversial investigative work.
- » The result of this corporate logic is that news programming has become as formulaic, watered down, and sensationalistic as entertainment programming – the point being to keep corporate stock prices high by keeping ratings high, slashing budgets and cutting costs.
- » The journalism that has emerged from this new business model is as economically sound from a corporate perspective as it is bankrupt and impoverished from a democratic perspective.
- » Easy stories – puff pieces, natural disasters, and celebrity news – have come to crowd out more complicated and in-depth stories that address issues that have the most bearing on citizens' lives.
- » Likewise, the claims made by public officials are no longer challenged or checked for accuracy: “balanced” news means airing different opinions from official sources without any attempt to intervene and figure out who's telling the truth – if anyone.
- » This regurgitation of the claims of those in power is precisely what one would expect from a system dominated by a handful of very wealthy corporations – and precisely the opposite of the kind of gutsy journalism that used to be expected and admired as fundamental to democracy.
- » In terms of foreign policy coverage, it simply illogical to expect these firms to foster journalism that is critical of the U.S. role in the world, and perfectly logical that we have ended up with “journalism” that reflects the interests of owners.
- » In terms of the coverage we get of corporate power, it is similarly illogical to expect corporate media to finance the kind of healthy journalism that might have provided real and sustained coverage of the endemic, structural corruption that led to recent corporate scandals.
- » This pro-corporate bias has also manifested itself in news coverage of free trade issues and policy. Given that their parent companies have a vested interest in status quo approaches to free trade, it should come as no surprise that news organizations like the New York Times, and TV networks, provide blatantly propagandistic coverage that distorts – when not completely eliminating – the rational voices of critique and protest.
- » Such stories are considered business stories and relegated to the business pages, meaning that the sources will be business sources. The result is a conflict between the need of owners to make money, and the public need for a vibrant journalism.
- » Given the understandable logic that informs this perversion of professional news journalism, it makes little sense to expect change unless the institutional nature of the industry changes.
- » Key to envisioning such change, and to making it happen, is to understand first that the system as it stands now is not a natural or organic entity – that it's the product of continual policy decisions.
- » Given that these policy decisions have been all but removed from the political arena of discussion, debate, and dissent, legislators are much more apt to respond to pressure from lobbyists who represent the corporations that dominate the media industry and the political system.
- » The fact is that this behind-the-scenes lobbying actually points to the very real potential for change, because when these decisions are understood, when they reach the light of day, people across the political spectrum can see what's going on.

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE NEWS?

» When that happens, when people understand what corporations are doing with their airwaves – and what they’re doing to undermine their democracy – everything changes. The power of corporate lobbyists decreases with the increasing power and potential of people to vote politicians out of office.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & WRITING

1. Why, according to McChesney, does it make perfect sense that our major media sources of journalism dedicate more “coverage” to sensationalistic stories than to stories about the issues that most affect people’s lives? How does the logic behind this differ from the logic that governed news reporting in the past? How about its difference from the logic that informs news coverage in some other countries and cultures?
2. In the current media climate, according to McChesney, what counts as “balanced” news? And if this purported “balance” is actually imbalanced, toward what view of the world is the balance tilted? And what gets left out?
3. How has one of the traditional functions of journalism – fact checking – suffered as a result of the changed nature of our news media? How does what McChesney says about the reliance on official sources fit into this?
4. What are some of the specific ways that the interests of parent companies shape the way their networks cover news (*e.g. coverage of foreign policy; corporate culture; trade issues*)?
5. It’s often said that the media are “liberal”. How might the analysis in this section respond to that interpretation of things?
6. What are “lobbyists”? What role have corporate lobbyists played in shaping the media system we have today?
7. What is the relationship between corporate lobbying and the democratic process?
8. What does McChesney see as the key to changing the media system?
9. Why, specifically, does he say he is hopeful about change?

ASSIGNMENTS

1. Read “What Makes Mainstream Media Mainstream,” by Noam Chomsky (www.zmag.org/chomsky/index.cfm). Summarize Chomsky’s major points, relate them to the major arguments made in Part 2 of this video, and provide your own point of view on this issue.
2. Keep a running daily news log over a one-week period (minimum). Focusing on CNN, Headline News, Fox News Channel, or one of the other major all-news networks, do the following: for each day: list the stories that are covered over a one-hour period (the subject matter); the time dedicated to each story; the qualifications of the “experts” (if any) who are quoted or who comment within the story; and a brief description of the *images* that are featured in each report, and the *language* used to tell the story.
Be prepared to share your findings with others, along with your conclusions about any patterns you discover, and how you think they relate to the analysis in this section provided by McChesney and Miller.
3. Do some research into lobbying firms and their influence. There are several good sites on the web that list the most powerful lobbyists, the amount of money they spend, and what they spend it on. A good place to start is the website of the Center for Responsive Politics (www.opensecrets.org). Within this website, the following links are especially useful:

» www.opensecrets.org/pubs/lobby00/lobby.asp

This link features a chart of the 128 lobbying firms that reported at least \$1 million in income for 1999, and reveals the rise of lobbying firms with Republican Party affiliations. According to the site, “Since 1997, firms that gave over 60 percent of their donations to Republicans saw their revenues increase by over 20 percent; the figure for firms that donate 60 percent or more to Democrats was slightly less than 8 percent.” Click on lobbying firm names for client lists.

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» www.opensecrets.org/pubs/lobby00/index.asp

Labeled "Influence, Inc", this link features the Center for Responsive Politics' third annual lobbying report, including "the first-ever year-to-year comparisons of lobbying spending on Capitol Hill. It provides the most revealing picture yet of the industries and interest groups that fund and deploy the army of lobbyists that constitute Washington's \$1.45 billion influence industry."

» www.opensecrets.org/industries/indus.asp?Ind=B

This link provides a list of lobbyists representing the communications and electronics industry and their spending.