

Ignorance is Strength: Complicity of the Corporate Media Behemoths

The degree to which the mass media are independent of government provides a useful index for gauging just how controlled or autonomous a culture really is. The less people know, the easier it is to manipulate and control them; the more informed they are, the more capable they are of making rational decisions and the harder it is to manipulate them through lies and deception.

In dictatorships where civil liberties are virtually nonexistent, the media are mouthpieces of government, and what the governed are permitted to see and hear is largely political propaganda. For example, in Syria, the media are largely state owned and operated through the Ministry of Information of the Ba'ath party. In this controlled environment, it is illegal to criticize the ruling party and the military; and any independent media must be licensed by the Ministry of Information, which monitors all media to ensure that it toes the party line. Internet sites are also passed through government filters to ensure that anything politically averse to it is not accessible to Syrian citizens. Here one need not appeal to Orwell's novel, *1984*, to find a clearer case of "Big Brother is Watching You."

Between such oppressive regimes and ones that are democratic and free, there are many shades of gray. Relative to the state of media in a nation, such as Syria, even the mainstream (corporate) media in the United States may appear to be "free" and "democratic." Still, this may be more a matter of degree than of kind. Moreover, the state of mainstream media in America is always capable of moving incrementally closer to that of more oppressive cultures by imperceptible changes. Thus, a central question is not so much whether the American mainstream media is controlled, but instead whether

it is moving incrementally toward greater levels of control. Unfortunately, the answer to this question is not an optimistic one.

Consolidation as a Major Factor in Mainstream Media's Complicity with Government

One main reason for this lack of optimism is the rising tide of media consolidation in the American mainstream media. Currently, broadcast TV is dominated by five major corporations: Fox/News Corp, CBS/Viacom, NBC/General Electric,¹ Tribune Company, and ABC/Disney. Radio is largely controlled by Clear Channel and Infinity/Viacom. Cable/Satellite TV giants include Comcast, DirecTV/News Corp, and Time Warner. These conglomerates form an intricate web of joint ventures, which spills over into other media, including the Internet. For example, NBC/General Electric, Fox/News Corp, and ABC/Disney jointly run a Web site called Hulu, which streams TV shows and movies; and Time Warner and CBS/Viacom have a joint venture with Comcast, which allows cable subscribers to access TV through the web, using Comcast's "On Demand Online" system. Thus, despite the number of apparent choices, most of what Americans see and hear is filtered through just a handful of interconnected monolithic media and telecom companies.

These relatively few giant corporations are motivated primarily by maximizing profit and providing dividends to stockholders. At the same time, these companies' continued existence and ability to expand their profitable horizons is in the hands of government. This is because the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and Congress can place regulatory strangleholds on media and telecom companies if they fail to cooperate with the current administration's policies and goals. In this way, government can literally regulate a corporation out of existence. Alternatively, government can reward cooperation with deregulation or just not passing certain regulations. It could raise or lower taxes; award or withdraw lucrative defense contracts; provide special incentives for investing in potentially profitable industries, and provide other government perks—all of which depend on the company's willingness to cooperate with government.

True, keeping consumers of news (the American public) informed about questionable government practices counts in corporate cost-benefit analyses about what, and how, to report. A news company cannot afford to alienate its audience as this leads to lost advertising revenue. The company must also look for breaking news that will increase ratings. Still, failure to break stories that expose government breaches of public trust or other questionable government practices does not necessarily turn away customers and decrease company revenues, especially if the public never even finds out the (whole) truth anyway. So, in trading off between keeping the public informed and