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Fighting Media Consolidation: Supporting Small Voices and Regulating Large Conglomerates

Media has an incredible amount of responsibility in our nation, particularly in its ability to inform and make meaning of current events. Whether it is communicated through a newspaper, a film, a radio show or a television network, media has become commonplace in the lives of Americans, and seeks to both entertain and inform its audience. Often, the media content consumed may represent certain perspectives or values, usually those rooted in the intentions of the media producer. In other words, every person, company, or organization that produces media often does so in a way that honors their own opinions or values, creating a platform to speak their own "truth." These platforms serve a crucial role in the mass media, as they collectively allow differing opinions and perspectives to be communicated to the American public.

Diversity of perspectives is a crucial component of the mass media's effectiveness, particularly in its role as a source of information to its audience. With multiple opinions and perspectives present on television, in movie theatres and written in headlines, the American public is encouraged to engage with the media and think critically about its content. Ideally, with multiple media producers occupying different platforms with their unique and valuable opinions, the mass media does its job by informing a democracy of citizens that play an active role in their community and their government. This valuable diversity of perspectives, however, has faced an increasingly problematic threat over the past few decades in the form of media consolidation.

Media consolidation, also known as "media ownership," refers to the concentration of ownership of media outlets—including television, film, print journalism, and radio—as a result of an increasing number of mergers between companies in the media industry. Instead of individual media outlets controlling and producing their own content to distribute, mergers allow the larger companies to "buy out" individual companies and, as a result, lessen the diversity of perspectives within the media. Though media consolidation has always been viewed as a potential threat to the diversity in media, it has never posed a threat like the one present today.

In 1983—only three decades ago—50 companies owned 90% of American media. Though this statistic may appear to be a bit problematic, it proves harmless compared to the statistics of this decade; as of 2011, six companies—namely GE, News Corporation, Disney, Viacom, Time Warner and CBS—control that same 90% of American media ("Media Consolidation: The Illusion of Choice"). These numbers seem even more daunting when one considers just how prevalent media is within American culture. When almost every television network, production company, radio station or print newspaper is controlled by one of six companies, it becomes quite clear just how much privilege these six companies hold in their ability to influence American culture. Until this problem is resolved, these companies will control "90% of everything Americans see, hear and consider important" ("Media Consolidation: The Illusion of Choice"), giving them immense power in shaping American public opinion.

This concentration of power allows the opinions of the influential few to become increasingly visible in the media while the opinions of smaller companies become less and less recognizable. The diversity of perspectives lessens and the American public loses the opportunity to engage with and learn from varying viewpoints. Thus, media consolidation affects the type of information that gets communicated, the people appointed to communicate this information, as well as media's role as an informant in an effective American democracy.

As a result of media consolidation, larger companies are buying out smaller, independent companies, who often provide the voice of minority groups in America. This increasing imbalance of both conglomerate and independently produced programming has been especially evident in network primetime lineups, which are known to attract some of the strongest viewership on television at any given time. In 1989, 24% of network primetime series were media-conglomerate produced, and 76% were independently produced; since 2010, those percentages have shifted to 13% and 87%, respectively ("Media Consolidation's Impact"). Furthering this finding, Eric Klinenberg, a sociology professor at New York University, believes there has been a decline in the past decade of minority and female-owned broadcast stations specifically. In his opinion, "the policies that promote media consolidation are, in fact, crushing small, independent, minority owned stations," an unfortunate consequence when "large companies start taking over so much of the field" ("Fighting for Air"). When small, underprivileged, voices are forced into mergers with larger companies, they arguably lose their platform to speak their unique opinions. Consequently, society loses out on an opportunity to become more educated on the concerns that occupy the lives of a diverse population of people.

In addition to a decline in independent content, media consolidation often leads to a decrease in local news coverage in favor of more popular, nationally based stories that appeal to a wider audience. When big media companies buy out smaller media companies, their motives are often rooted in money; their reporters are encouraged to cover national news stories and those that will garner popular attention, and as a result, an increased profit. This lack of local news is demonstrated most clearly in a study conducted by Philip Napoli and Michael Yan on the effects of media ownership on local news programming. They found that a quarter (24.9%) of commercial news stations did not choose to report on local news, and of those that did, local news coverage occupied an average of 1.78 hours of the day's broadcast (Napoli and Yan 53). When media consolidation allows bigger companies to buy out smaller ones—often those that operate on a local basis—American citizens are stripped of news reporting in their communities.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, media consolidation prevents the media from carrying out its job as an observer of those in power—namely the government and big businesses. The media is ideally responsible for reporting on the actions of organizations, people, and companies in power in an effort to hold them accountable when demonstrating their power and privilege. When a powerful few own the very media outlets that are meant to critique them, American society loses the media as an unbiased watchman who makes sure that those in power do not use their privilege irresponsibly. *Boston Globe* journalist Michael Corcoran puts it plainly when he acknowledges the challenge that media consolidation poses to the very nature of media itself: "How can we have a real debate about media issues, when we depend on that very media to provide a platform for this debate?" (Corcoran) Thus, the media companies who execute media consolidation benefit themselves by removing the diversity of smaller companies who challenge and critique their methods, consequently solidifying their own power and influence.

Though media consolidation has been increasing over the years, the problem it poses has never been as important as it is today—not only because the concentration of media power is greater than ever before, but also because of the unique media climate today. Social media has opened a multitude of new media outlets that are becoming increasingly accessible to a larger population, by providing opportunities for a variety of diverse platforms to be built and more voices to be heard. If media consolidation continues to build as it has over recent years, large media conglomerates will arguably acquire and buy out these independent voices that have found a platform in social media. Now more than ever before, measures need to be taken in order to halt the continuing process of media consolidation and assure that the diversity of perspectives allotted by social media continue to thrive and contribute valuable opinions to the mass media.

While the prospect of continuing media consolidation is a bit daunting, steps can be taken to create a mass media system where smaller outlets rediscover their voices and the power of big media companies are held within reasonable limits. Ideally, a two-part solution can implement this ideal: provide funding to local programming to encourage their competition with nationally based content, as well as improve and strengthen regulations on big media companies in an attempt to even the playing field and ensure their fair contribution to our nation's democracy.

One such solution is to give back power to those that experience the negative effects of media consolidation: local and independent media outlets. Much of the reasoning behind big media company mergers is profit-based, proving detrimental to the survival of local media; these smaller companies often do not have the means or profit to challenge big media companies. To provide local and independent media with the monetary support needed to compete and ensure that their programming is kept on the air, media conglomerates should be required to pay money to local media outlets with each acquisition; that is, a fraction of profit that media conglomerates make as a result of their far-reaching power into multiple media outlets should be distributed to individual media outlets. The money distributed to these outlets will be used as a way to improve programming quality, in-depth news coverage, and other aspects that prove a network, publication, or radio station as worthy of consumption.

This will not only provide local and independent outlets with the money they need to compete within the mass media, but will also curtail the power that big media companies acquire through increased profit and influence. This will acquire more viewers for local and independent companies, which will attract advertising money. Ideally, with the help from both media conglomerates and advertisers seeking consumers, local and independent media will be able to stand alone in their successes. They will be just as highly regarded as national media, and will succeed in delivering their diverse content to a population that is interested in their perspectives.

A further way to curtail the power of big media conglomerates is to involve the Federal Communications Committee (FCC), a government agency overseen by Congress, whose purpose is to preserve a competitive media landscape by setting limits on how much of a local media outlet a big company can own. Ideally, the FCC serves to ensure that media outlets of every shape and size are competing fairly. In recent years, however, larger media conglomerates have been successful in using their power to influence the FCC and their policies, and consequently have been able to bypass regulations and buy out smaller media companies to an unfair extent.

Considering this, one can reduce media consolidation by ensuring that the original regulations as declared by the FCC are held to a high standard, and not compromised by the influence of larger media outlets. Due to the fact that Congress oversees the FCC, an effective way to bring this problem to light is to introduce it in the political world, both at the national level and within local communities. By educating the nation's voters on the concept of media consolidation—whether it be in schools, universities, or local government—the general public can rally for the election of politicians who also view media consolidation as a genuine problem. Politicians can shed light on this problem in Washington, and with the help of other members of Congress, can further work to make sure that the FCC honors to their regulations when seeing to the concerns and incentives of big media corporations.

This solution secures the the diversity of media outlets by ensuring that the FCC fairly regulates how much ownership one media company can have, thus taking local and independent media outlets into consideration. Diverse media outlets contribute a variety of perspectives on current issues to the American mass media; if the FCC ensures these perspectives are respected just as much as mainstream ones, American media can represent the diversity of thoughts present in our society, rather than opinions of a select few.

It is necessary to recognize that this two-part solution may have some faults, but with careful consideration, it is possible to combat these challenges in favor of a more enriched, democratic media. One potential obstacle this solution poses is that of increased costs. With the increased funding of local and independent media outlets, it is a valid assumption that costs will go up more so than if this action had not been taken. A possible way to lessen these costs, however, is for media industries to provide further validation of the importance of local content and news coverage (rather than underestimating it in favor of national content) and seek advertising money in order to make up for the production costs. If advertisers believe that there is a significant audience tuning into local and independent programming, they may be more willing to pay in order to advertise their product during the program.

While many find media consolidation to be dangerous, some find it beneficial and do not think media consolidation should be curtailed. One of the main arguments they point to is the fact that with the acquisition of smaller media outlets, media conglomerates can provide the masses with “popular” content designed to interest and entertain mass audiences. This argument, however, neglects the important role that media—particularly television, music, and films—play in shaping identities of media consumers. Lowell Peterson, the Executive Director of the Writers Guild of America, points out the importance of catering to “niche” audiences by providing them spaces to occupy “communities with their own experiences and interests” (Peterson). If media are owned by smaller numbers of large conglomerates, the programming neglects these unique, diverse audiences and loses its positive influence in the lives of Americans.

As the nation enters into a new media age with the increased appearance of media in daily life, it is crucial that media consolidation is recognized as a valid problem. By supporting smaller voices and keeping big media conglomerates in check, American can rebuild a more diverse and effective media that supports and benefits *all* media companies and the American people who look to the media to help make meaning of the society in which they live.

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