feature article *joshua gamson and pearl latteier*

do media monsters devour diversity?

Politicians and critics have long lamented that the rise of huge media conglomerates means the death of diversity in newspapers and on the airwaves. But research suggests that media conglomeration, however distasteful, does not necessarily reduce diversity.

Photo by A. Pierce Bounds, Dickinson College

At the Philadelphia airport, local and network media reporters await the return of Song Yongyi, a librarian from Dickinson College who had been imprisoned in China while doing research on the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Their reports will be shaped in part by the kinds of news organizations they work for.

Something odd is going on when Ted Turner, Trent Lott, Al Franken, the National Rifle Association, Jesse Jackson and Walter Cronkite agree. Opposition to media consolidation has turned these adversaries on most issues into bedfellows. When the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) prepared to further loosen restrictions on media ownership—a move approved by the FCC in June 2003 and then blocked by a circuit court three months later—the decision was met with a motley chorus of criticism. FCC commissioner Jonathan Adelstein called the problem "the McDonaldization of American media." Former Senator Carol Moseley-Braun stated that "we have to ensure that there is a diversity of ownership, a diversity of voice." And Cronkite, the veteran and widely-respected news anchor, declared concentration "an impediment to a free and independent press." The new rules would "stifle debate, inhibit new ideas, and shut out smaller businesses trying to compete," said Turner, whose vast holdings include CNN, TBS, and Hanna-Barbera cartoons, and who is a major shareholder in parent company Time Warner AOL. "There are really five companies that control 90 percent of what we read, see and hear. It's not healthy," Turner added.

Critics and policymakers have long been troubled by consolidation among America's mainstream media. Opponents of the Communications Act of 1934—which established the FCC and allocated the majority of the airwaves to commercial broadcasters—warned that commercial, network-dominated

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Offices in Berkeley, California for KPFA, the flagship radio station of the independent Pacifica Broadcasting Network. Consolidated ownership of many local radio stations, most notably by Clear Channel Communications, has dramatically decreased local programming while increasing the number of syndicated shows that air simultaneously in multiple markets.

radio would squelch, as the ACLU director then put it, the few small stations that "voice critical or radical views." And in 1978, the Supreme Court ruled "it is unrealistic to expect true diversity from a commonly owned station-newspaper combination." Nonetheless, during the past two decades—and with a big boost from the Telecommunications Act of 1996—media ownership has become increasingly concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. Time and Warner Brothers merged into the world's biggest media company in 1989. A decade later, Viacom and CBS set a new record for the largest corporate merger ever. And the 2000 AOL-TimeWarner merger was several times bigger than that.

The critics' logic is this: Citizens need access to diverse sources of news and opinions to make well-informed decisions about how to vote and live. Also, media should address the needs and interests of America's diverse population, and not just those of its elite. When a small group of "gatekeepers" controls how information circulates, the spectrum of available ideas, images and opinions narrows. Big media companies prefer programming and voices that conform to their own financial interests, and they make it nearly impossible for smaller, independent companies to offer alternatives.

This frightening vision is intuitively reasonable. But a close look at decades of scholarship on the relationship between media ownership and content diversity uncovers a surprising story—one much more complicated than the vision of media monsters gobbling up diversity. Scholars have zeroed in on three broadly defined types of diversity in media: format diversity, demographic diversity and idea diversity. The research suggests that when it comes to "diversity," media-consolidation critics are, if not barking up the wrong tree, at least in need of a more nuanced, sharper, more carefully directed bark. Indeed, effective opposition to media ownership consolidation may require, ironically, acknowledging the ways media giants sometimes promote diverse content.

format diversity

Suppose you turn on your TV after dinner, and every single channel is broadcasting either an *American Idol* spin-off or a makeover show. That would mean the after-dinner time slot in your area lacks "format diversity"—or variety in programming—turning everything into, as FCC commissioner Adelstein describes it, "Big Mac, fries and a Coke." In particular, observers worry that consolidation undercuts local content. Most experts agree that this has happened to radio since the late 1990s, as Clear Channel Communications has gobbled up stations throughout the country. Programming that was once determined locally is now overseen by Clear Channel programmers headquartered elsewhere, and local disc jockeys have been replaced by a single show that plays simultaneously in multiple markets. Consolidation of radio ownership encourages this centralized, cost-cutting format. The same logic would be expected in newspapers and television; running wire service copy is cheaper than employing staff reporters, and standardized production is less expensive than hiring a team of local broadcasters.

Of course, because different audiences are attracted to different content and format types, it also makes business sense for a conglomerate to maintain different sorts of programming—including locally produced content—just as General Motors produces lines of cars for different types of customers. This can actually promote format diversity. In a market with three competing stations, argues communications law expert

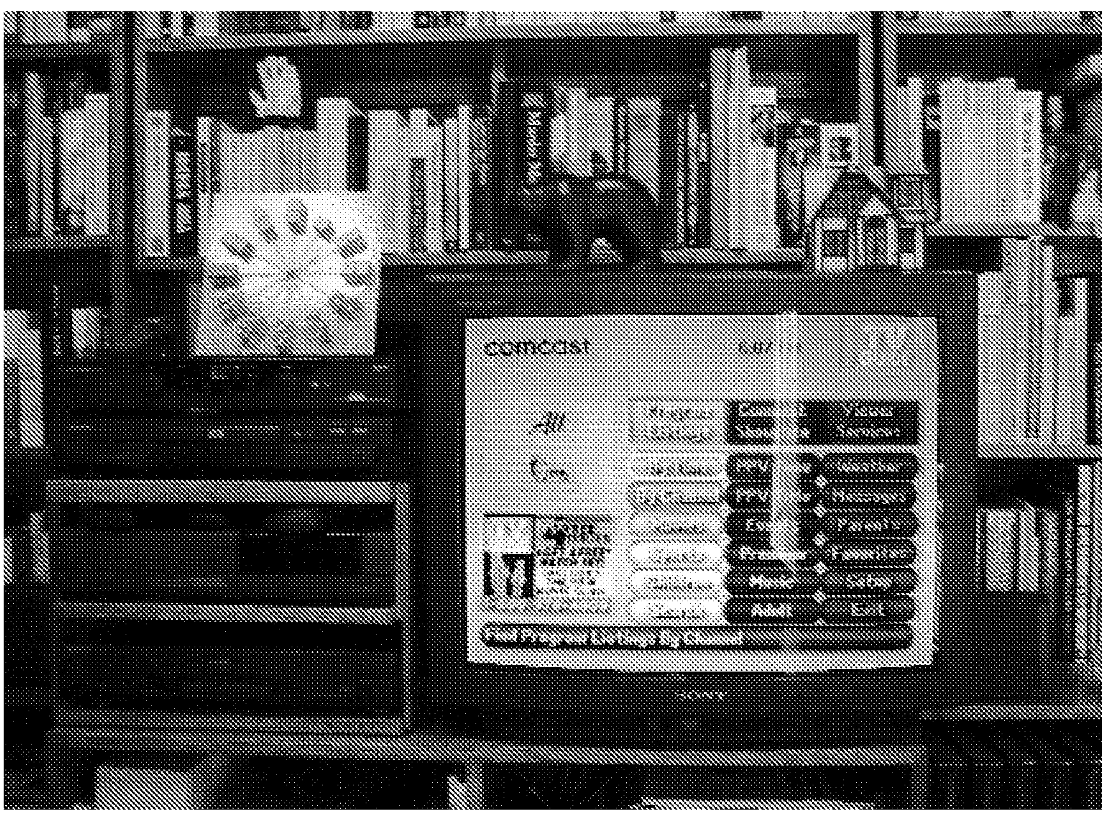
A bank of television sets that are all tuned to the same station in an electronics store in Emeryville, California. Consolidation among media companies does not simply increase or decrease the diversity of media content and formats. Some large companies homogenize their offerings, but others diversify to attract different audiences.

Edwin Baker, each station will try to attract the largest possible audience by providing fare that the majority prefers. The stations will wind up sounding pretty similar. In contrast, if all three stations are owned by the same company, ownership has no incentive to compete against itself, and will try to make the stations dissimilar in order to attract different audiences. Similarly, it makes sense for entertainment conglomerates to make their various holdings more rather than less distinct in format, and to build a "diverse portfolio" of media properties. Viacom does not want its UPN ("America's Top Model," "The Parkers," "WWE Smackdown") to be like its CBS ("CSI," "Judging Amy," "Late Show with David Letterman"), its Sundance Channel (documentaries on HIV/AIDS, the films of Patrice Chereau) to air the same kind of material as its Spike TV ("Sports Illustrated's 40th Anniversary Swimsuit Special"), or its Downtown Press ("chick-lit" like Alexandra Potter's *Calling Romeo*) to publish what its Atria Press does ("academic" titles like bell hooks' *The Will to Change*). This multiple-brand logic promotes rather than reduces format diversity.

Research suggests that media consolidation does not simply increase or decrease format diversity. Some studies compare the fate of local or public-affairs programming in independent versus conglomerated companies. Others look for shifts in content after a publication is bought by a bigger company. The results are tellingly mixed. Some find big differences between the offerings of independent and corporate-owned outlets, but ambiguous effects on format diversity. Others find little or no difference at all. For example, a 1995 study found that two years after Gannett—owner of *USA Today*, among many other papers—bought the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, the paper devoted almost 30 percent more space to news than it had before, and 7 percent less space to advertising. On the other hand, the average story became shorter, the percentage of hard-news stories smaller, and wire stories came to outnumber staff-written ones. Within the expanded news reporting, the proportions of local, national, and international news changed little. The paper became more like *USA Today*, but simultaneously the "news hole"—the amount of content consisting of news reporting—increased from when it was independently owned. Other studies of Gannett-bought papers—in Arkansas and Florida—found that international and national news decreased after the company took over. Local news, often in the form of crime or disaster stories, actually increased after consolidation.

A recent large-scale, five-year study by the Project for Excellence in Journalism also found mixed results. The researchers asked who produces "higher quality" local television news, which they defined as news that "covers the whole community," is "significant and informative," demonstrates "enterprise and courage," and is "fair, balanced, and accurate," "authoritative" and "highly local." Although they did not isolate "format diversity" in their study, they nonetheless offer some clues about the relationship between ownership and formats. On the one hand, just as anti-consolidation critics would predict, of 172 newscasts and 23,000 stories, researchers found the "best" programs overall tended to come from smaller station groups or from stations affiliated with but not owned by networks. On the other hand, they also found that "local ownership offered little protection against newscasts being very poor." As an evening's cursory viewing might confirm, local news is weak regardless of whether or not it is part of a conglomerate. Even more to the point, the researchers found that stations whose parent companies owned a newspaper in the same market—exactly the kind of "cross-ownership" that consolidation critics worry about—produced "higher-quality" newscasts, including more locally relevant content. They ran more stories on "important community issues" and fewer celebrity and human-interest stories. Cross-ownership shifted the types of programming provided, but in the direction most critics of cross-ownership seem to favor. Moreover, being owned by a small company, while an advantage when it came to "quality," was certainly no guarantee of a diverse mix of local and non-local content.

For a glimpse of how big media corporations—aided by government deregulation—sometimes do reduce format diversity, look at the current state of commercial radio. In a series of scathing articles for *Salon*, Eric Boehlert exposed Clear Channel as "radio's big bully," known for "allowing animals to be killed live on the air, severing long-standing ties with community and charity events, laying off thousands of workers, homogenizing playlists, and a corporate culture in which dirty tricks are a way of life." Concentrated, conglomerate ownership is certainly a prerequisite for being a big bully, and Clear Channel has used its power to undercut local programming and standardize rather than diversify both music and talk on radio. But radio's striking homogeneity is not just the result of concentrated ownership. As Boehlert wrote in 2001, radio "sucks" (similar-sounding songs, cookie-cutter stars) because record companies, through independent promoters, pay radio stations huge amounts to get their songs on playlists. With or without Clear Channel, material without money behind it—alternative styles of music, music by artists who do not fit the standard celebrity



Mergers and acquisitions in the media industry changed ownership of the cables attached to this television set four times in the past 12 years. Each change involved the purchase of a smaller company by a larger one. Each change also increased the number of channels available to subscribers and the cost of monthly service.

Photo by Mr. Kenn

Even though critics worry about cross-ownership of news outlets, television stations whose parent companies own a newspaper in the same market may produce higher quality broadcasts.

model, innovative and therefore risky formats—does not get airplay. It is not that ownership has no effect on format diversity, only that the impact is neither uniform nor inevitable. It is instead influenced by particular corporate strategies and the inner-workings of particular media industries.

demographic diversity

In everyday conversations, diversity usually refers to demographics: whether a workplace employs or a school enrolls people of various racial, ethnic, gender and economic categories. How the media represents and addresses the interests of America's diverse populations—who gets seen and heard—is, appropriately, often in question. Studies routinely find that the individuals appearing in mass media are disproportionately white, middle-class men between the ages of 20 and 60. But they have not figured out how, if at all, concentrated corporate ownership affects representation. This should not be surprising. A gap between the diversity of the population and media images of that population existed long before the rise of the media giants. And it clearly cuts across commercial and non-commercial media: studies of public broadcasting's guests show little demographic diversity, while daytime talk shows produced by for-profit conglomerates—however tawdry—offer some of the greatest demographic diversity on television.

Both government agencies and scholars have assumed that the key to ensuring demographically diverse content is demographically diverse ownership. Until recently, the FCC and the courts attempted to promote this kind of diversity by giving licensing preferences to minority-owned (and sometimes female-owned) broadcast stations. The FCC halted the licensing preferences in 1995, and the rapid consolidation of deregulated media companies makes it even less likely that companies and stations will be minority-owned today. Although it might seem reasonable to think that fewer minority-owned companies will mean less demographically diverse content—in surveys, minority owners do report being more likely to produce "minority" programming—studies of content do not back up such claims. Two studies comparing minority-owned (African American and Latino) radio stations to white-owned stations in the 1980s found that owners' ethnic backgrounds did not significantly affect demographic representation in their programming. There are many good reasons to pursue affirmative action in media ownership and employment, but ensuring diversity in media content is not one of them.

If anything has promoted demographic diversity in media content, it is the rise of niche-marketing and narrow-casting, which target previously excluded demographic groups with images of themselves. Although minority owners often typically start that process—gay marketers tapping the gay niche, Latino publishers targeting Latino readers—it proceeds regardless of whether they remain owners. Indeed, niche marketing has become a media-giant staple: Time Warner AOL started the highly successful *People en Español* in 1996, NBC-owned Bravo produced the summer 2003 hit "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy," Robert Johnson became the first African-American billionaire when he sold Black Entertainment Television to Viacom in 2002, and the largest shareholder of radio's Hispanic Broadcasting Corporation is Clear Channel. Multicultural content and oligopoly media ownership are clearly not incompatible.

idea diversity

Almost everyone pays lip service to the notion that citizenship thrives when people are exposed to a variety of contending viewpoints. As the number of owners decreases, critics of media conglomeration argue, so does the number of voices contributing to the "marketplace of ideas." Media conglomerates with holdings in all kinds of other media and non-media industries have the power to censor the news in accordance with their interests. There is plenty of anecdotal evidence that consolidation tips content against ideas critical of the corporate owners. The *Los Angeles Times*, for example, failed in 1980 to cover a taxpayer-funded $2 billion water project that stood to benefit the Times-Mirror Company. Likewise, NBC remained silent on the 1990 boycott of their owner GE. And CBS's *America Tonight* show had a pro-tobacco bias in the mid-1990s, when the Loews Corporation, owner of Lorillard Tobacco, held a controlling interest in CBS. Disney-owned ABC News even cancelled an investigative report about sloppy background checks at Disneyworld. A recent study also found a "synergy bias" among media giants, in which media companies slip unannounced promotions of their other products and services into newscasts—as when ABC devoted two hours of *Good Morning America* to Disneyworld's 25th Anniversary. In short, media corporations act in their own special interests, promote ideas that suit those interests, and sometimes "spike" stories through self-censorship.

Beyond these forms of direct self-interest, though, the connection between ownership concentration and idea diversity is harder to discern. Generally speaking, one might observe that the American media environment has been an inhospitable place for radical, dissenting voices before, during and after the rise of media giants. More specifically, scholars have found that viewpoint diversity does not line up neatly with particular ownership structures. For example, the recent Project for Excellence in Journalism study of local television measured how many sources were cited in a story and how many points of view were represented in stories involving a dispute or controversy. Locally owned stations presented no more viewpoint diversity than non-locally owned ones, and small companies no more than big ones. Network-owned-and-operated stations did better than smaller, less well-funded affiliates. The weak connection between viewpoint diversity and monopoly ownership is actually old news. In a classic 1985 study, Robert Entman examined the first page and editorial section of 91 newspapers in three types of markets: competitive local markets with multiple, separately owned papers; monopolistic markets with only one local newspaper; and "quasi-monopolies," where joint-owned or joint-operated papers share a market. He measured diversity as the number of people or organizations mentioned in each story, and the number of stories that presented conflicting opinions. The study

A newspaper stand offering both mainstream and alternative publications. Studies of newspaper content suggest that independently owned papers are no more likely to include diverse ideas and perspectives than are papers owned by conglomerates.

found that on no measure did independent papers present more diversity than papers in monopoly or quasi-monopoly situations. In all of the papers, more than half the stories involved fewer than two actors, and less than one-tenth presented conflicting opinions. In other words, regardless of who owned them or how competitive their markets were, the papers were not exactly brimming with lively debate and diverse ideas.

the challenge for media reformers

The radical concentration of global media ownership has spawned at least one excellent, rebellious child: a vibrant, smart, broad-based media reform movement. Groups like Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting, the Media Alliance, the Center for Digital Democracy, Independent Media Centers, the People's Communication Charter, and many others, are growing in strength, alliance and effectiveness. There are many reasons to object to media oligopolies that research on diversity does not speak to: the concentration of private power over a public resource in a democracy is wrong in principle; standardized media are part of a distasteful, branded, chain-store life of Barnes and Noble, Starbucks, and Disney; corporate, multinational media are increasingly unaccountable to the public; and a corporate press is probably a less adversarial press. But the research on media concentration should challenge this reform movement to relinquish at least one sacrosanct belief. If our goal is vibrant, diverse media content—what the People's Communication Charter, an international activist group, refers to as the "plurality of opinions and the diversity of cultural expressions and languages necessary for democracy"—then research suggests that concentrated ownership is not equivalent to reduced diversity. Sometimes corporate media giants homogenize, and sometimes they do not. Sometimes they shut people up and stifle dissent, and sometimes they open up extra space for new people to be visible and vocal. That they do so not because they are committed to the public good but because diversity sometimes serves their interests does not negate the outcome. And, romantic notions notwithstanding, independently owned and noncommercial media hardly guarantee diverse content.

Just as there are different kinds of diversity, there are also different kinds of ownership concentration. A single corporation might own all the major outlets in a single market, or a chain of newspapers, or a film production company and a theater chain, or music, television and book companies. These different kinds of concentration promote and inhibit different kinds of content diversity. Researchers, activists, and policymakers must identify the conditions under which concentrated, conglomerated media ownership facilitates diverse media formats, opinions and demographic representations. A genuine commitment to diverse media content may require an unsettling task: encouraging those conditions even while opposing the corporate domination of media, feeding the giants while trying to topple them.

recommended resources

Bagdikian, Ben H. *The Media Monopoly* (6th ed.). Boston: Beacon Press, 2000. In this new edition of a now classic book, Bagdikian presents an impassioned argument against media concentration.

Baker, C. Edwin. *Media, Markets, and Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2002. Baker demonstrates that media products are not like other commodities, and he argues that market competition alone fails to give media audiences what they want.

Columbia Journalism Review. "Who Owns What?" Online. http://www.cjr.org/tools/owners. This informative website lists the holdings of approximately 50 major media companies.

Croteau, David, and William Hoynes. *The Business of Media: Corporate Media and the Public Interest*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2001. This book contrasts two different views of media conglomeration: the market model, which regards people as consumers, and the public-interest model, which regards people as citizens.

Compaine, Benjamin M., and Douglas Gomery. *Who Owns the Media? Competition and Concentration in the Mass Media Industry*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000. This book provides a detailed look at the current media industry and challenges common assumptions about the dangers of ownership concentration.

Entman, Robert M. "Newspaper Competition and First Amendment Ideals: Does Monopoly Matter?" *Journal of Communication* 35, 2 (1985): 147-65. This study of newspapers in competitive and non-competitive markets concludes that market competition does not guarantee content diversity.

Horwitz, Robert. "On Media Concentration and the Diversity Question," Department of Communication, University of California, San Diego, 2003. Online. http://communication.ucsd.edu/people/ConcentrationpaperICA.htm. This is a careful discussion of the media ownership debate, empirical research and the virtues of a "mixed media system."

Napoli, Philip M. "Deconstructing the Diversity Principle." *Journal of Communication* 49, 4 (1999): 7-34. Napoli argues that the FCC policies on media ownership have long been based on unproven assumptions about the relationship between ownership diversity and content diversity.