

# Ownership, Regulation, and Guidance of Media

## Learning Objectives

1. Identify the difference between public/semipublic and private media.
2. Classify the different forms of ownership among private media, including patterns of media consolidation.
3. Describe the consequences of these different media ownership types and media economics for news coverage.
4. Analyze the debates over media regulation and regulation in the United States (U.S.), including stakes and regulatory policy.
5. Explain the various forces, beyond regulation and economics, that attempt to control media.

Media play a central role in democratic governance. They perform a critical watchdog function, informing the public of government waste, overreach, and corruption so that leaders are held accountable at the voting booth. Recent studies of declines in local news, for example, find the ongoing reductions in local newsrooms and local coverage to be associated with numerous troubling consequences for political accountability at state and local levels. Less local coverage is associated with less-competitive local elections and more of incumbency advantage.<sup>1</sup> At the state level, government corruption is more frequent in the absence of robust local coverage. When state capitals are remote—further from the local press in other state localities—corruption is higher amongst state officials.<sup>2</sup> When members of the U.S. House of Representatives are not monitored closely by the local press in their home districts, they do not work as hard for their constituencies, are less active in congressional hearings, are less likely to vote against their party, are less likely to serve on district-relevant committees,

and bring less money and fewer benefits to the districts they serve.<sup>3</sup> As citizens move away from quality sources of geographically tied local news and move to other venues such as cable news networks and online news, House members have less incentive to provide services to the district in order to earn praise from the local press. Citizens are also more attentive to and more knowledgeable about state and local politics and participate at higher rates when local media cover local politics.<sup>4</sup> Ongoing cuts to local newsrooms and disappearing news venues substantially weaken the links through which local citizens learn about what local leaders and representatives are doing, making citizens less able to hold them accountable.<sup>5</sup>

Concern about who will wield media power has been a central issue in U.S. politics since colonial days. In this chapter, we will weigh the pros and cons of various forms of ownership and control of the mass media as well as the implications of changing patterns. We will also assess the impact of various pressures on the mass media industry, such as economic constraints and lobbies. The policy issues involved in media ownership and control are complex and tightly intertwined with political preferences. It is no wonder that attempts in the United States to legislate media ownership and control have produced little agreement on what the laws should be.

## Control and Ownership: Public and Semipublic

---

Who controls and owns the media affect not only media behavior but also the substance of media output, in line with the old adage, “He who pays the piper calls the tune.” People concerned about self-serving politicians are likely to oppose government ownership and operation of the media. They also are apt to be leery about extensive government regulation of privately owned and operated media. By contrast, people who believe that for-profit media enterprises cater to low-level mass tastes or who distrust the business ethics of corporations, especially huge ones, do not want a media system in which private ownership and control dominate.

### The Crux of the Debate

Opponents of *public media ownership*—referring to media owned wholly or in part by the government—fear that it leads to programming that uncritically supports government policies, even in democratic countries. The fear is well founded. However, evidence from long-standing public media such as the British government’s nonpartisan British Broadcasting

Corporation shows that public media can produce programming without direct political interference from governments.<sup>6</sup>

Private control of media—referring to media owned by individuals or businesses and operating for profit—if divided among many owners, is likely to bring more conflicting interests into play than government control does. Even within large corporations, business interests are apt to be diverse and often incompatible, so company leaders support diverse policies. Overall, when business enterprises control broadcasting, the prevailing political values reflected in the choice of programs are likely to be mainstream and middle class. The pressures springing from profit considerations lead to offerings with mass appeal rather than controversial social or cultural crusades. Advertisers generate the largest share of the media's income. They pay for the privilege of reaching large numbers of potential customers, particularly 18- to 49-year-olds who are the most active shoppers. Government-owned and government-controlled media are free from commercial pressures because they can use tax money to finance whatever programs they believe to be in the public interest. They must consider intragovernmental power struggles, but they do not need to consider the economic consequences of the size of their audience.

When most Americans distrust government more than business, private ownership and control of the mass media are the preferred option. Consequently, the bulk of American news media fare, especially on television, is geared toward simple, emotion-laden programming that attracts large, diverse audiences. Controversial or troublesome issues that may antagonize or deplete media audiences and diminish advertising revenues are largely shunned.

Popular, “lightweight” programming draws the wrath of many people, particularly intellectual elites who scorn the mass public's tastes even when they themselves flock to fluff programs. Some critics argue that people would choose highbrow, intellectual programs over lightweight entertainment if they had the chance, even though proof is plentiful that the public prefers shallow entertainment to more serious programs.<sup>7</sup> In print news, magazines featuring sex or violence far outsell journals that treat political and social issues seriously. Huge crowds are willing to pay heavily in time and money to see movies featuring heinous crimes and explicit sex. The most popular pay television channels show what is euphemistically called “adult entertainment,” whereas channels devoted to highbrow culture languish and often perish. On the internet, one-fourth of daily search engine requests and one-third of all downloads involve sexually explicit content.<sup>8</sup>

During recent White House administrations, however, politics often gave entertainment programming a run for its money. In 2018, for

example, President Trump's State of the Union address drew an audience of 45.6 million. Though his audience was smaller than that of Obama's first State of the Union address in 2010 (48 million), it beat ratings for the Grammys, which attracted 26 million viewers. Though the Obama and Trump presidencies seem unique thus far in their ability to capture the attention of the mass public, it's typically been the case that politics rarely trumps entertainment in the modern media era. It remains to be seen whether high levels of interest in presidential politics will continue.<sup>9</sup>

Related to concerns about news media domination by powerful government or private interests is the fear of undue influence if only a small number of organizations share media control. Diversity of media ownership presumably encourages the expression of diverse views, which to many Americans is the essence of democracy. The marketplace where ideas and opinions are debated must be wide open. But there is no agreement on exactly how many owners are required for sufficient diversity.<sup>10</sup> Americans appear to be more concerned about the concentration of media ownership in comparatively few hands than about control of the media by business. Social reformers, however, are more concerned about business control, claiming that it fosters tabloid journalism and suppresses discussion of pressing social problems.

## How the Public and Semipublic System Works

In the United States, outright government ownership and control over media is limited. However, it is growing as more local governments own cable television systems or operate channels on privately owned systems. Government ownership raises serious unresolved questions about the limitations, if any, to be placed on the government's right to use these outlets to further partisan political purposes.

The federal government is most heavily involved in broadcasting, with local governments in second place. The federal government controls broadcasts to U.S. military posts throughout the world through the United States Armed Forces Radio and Television Service in the Department of Defense. It also owns foreign media outlets, which often relay U.S. government policy, though not exclusively. The Voice of America (VOA) is a fully government-funded multimedia news source. It serves as the official external broadcasting institution of the United States, providing English and foreign-language news, information, and cultural programming for radio, television, and the internet outside the U.S. The VOA serves an estimated weekly audience of more than 280 million. It broadcasts more than 1,500 hours of programs weekly to a foreign audience through radio, television,

and the internet. VOA has more than 2,500 affiliate stations and communicates in more than forty languages.<sup>11</sup>

Broadcasting by semipublic institutions is another control option. The American public broadcasting system, created through the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, represents a mixture of public and private financing and programming and public and private operation of radio and television stations. The public broadcasting system supports educational and public service television stations whose programs generally do not attract large audiences. Those stations need subsidies because they usually cannot find enough commercial sponsors to pay for their shows.

Members of the public broadcasting system include more than 1,500 noncommercial public radio and television stations, primarily owned and operated by community organizations and colleges and universities. In recent years, National Public Radio (NPR) increased its broadcasting reach across all three affiliate types, and more than 1,000 noncommercial radio stations linked together as the independently financed NPR (see Table 2-1). Approximately 98.5% of the U.S. population is within a listening area of an NPR-carrying station.

The administrative arrangements for the public broadcasting system are complex. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), staffed by political appointees, handles the general administration, but it has been kept separate from the programming side of the operation to insulate public broadcasting from political pressures. A separate Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) produces programming. Largely through the awarding of grants, the CPB tries to encourage the development of programming aimed at addressing the needs of previously underserved audiences—minority

Table 2-1 Weekly Broadcast Audience for Top 20 NPR-Affiliated Radio Stations, 2015–2018

Year	Listenership
2015	8,724,100
2016	10,212,600
2017	11,210,500
2018	11,047,900

Source: Based on data from Nielsen Audio Nationwide for persons 12+. Public broadcasting: Fact sheet. (2019, July 23). *Pew Research Center on Journalism & Media*. <https://www.journalism.org/fact-sheet/public-broadcasting/>.

populations and children in particular.<sup>12</sup> More than 70% of CPB's federal funding goes directly to local stations.

The attempt to keep the CPB from influencing programming has failed. The corporation does not tell public television stations what programs they should feature; instead, it has guided programming by paying for some types of programs and refusing to pay for others. This has constituted purse-string control of programming by the government. The results have earned praise along with scorn. In radio, NPR was created to both produce and distribute programs. Because cost considerations made it impossible to include all noncommercial radio stations, only the largest, best organized ones were included and are eligible for CPB funding grants and participation in NPR programs.

Private foundations and big business enterprises have subsidized a significant portion of the public broadcasting system income (Table 2-2). The Reagan administration authorized PBS to engage in some commercial broadcasting of economic news and to accept a limited amount of advertising. These changes have enhanced corporate influence over programming. The general public also has influenced public broadcasting through donations—individual giving—which constitutes its other primary source of income. Nevertheless, securing adequate financing is an enduring problem. Dependence on federal funds, even when those funds constitute a fraction of total funding, entails some subservience to federal control, despite barriers to direct government influence.

An emphasis on experimental programs—cultural offerings such as plays, classical music, and ballet—and a stress on high-quality news and public affairs programs distinguish public television broadcasts from commercial television.<sup>13</sup> The nature and quality of programming vary widely because public television represents a decentralized bevy of local stations. The audience for public television, except for its children's programs, has been relatively small, rarely more than 2% of television viewers. Even minority groups, to whom a number of public broadcast programs are targeted, prefer commercial entertainment. Still, PBS reaches 63.7 million primetime television viewers and 14 million visitors to pbs.org monthly, and 146 million episodes of PBS programs are streamed per year.<sup>14</sup> During the 2020 election, NPR's website drew its largest audience ever—34.7 million unique users, generating 158.9 million page views during the week of the election. Election Day audiences were up 65% from 2016, and on the day after the election, there were 41 million story views across NPR platforms.<sup>15</sup> The typical monthly NPR cross-platform audience is 163 million.<sup>16</sup> Still, because of the relatively limited appeal

of public broadcasting and the need to reduce public expenditures, there has been some pressure to disband the system completely and reallocate its frequencies to commercial channels. In 2016, the Obama administration requested \$445 million for the CPB for 2019. The Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education bill would be the funding vehicle, approved by the Senate and Appropriations Committees in June and July 2016. However, in the wake of the 2016 election, public broadcasting advocates began speculating about CPB funding prospects during the Trump administration. Their concerns were not unwarranted. In each of the four consecutive years of his term, President Trump proposed eliminating funding for the CPB.<sup>17</sup> With continuing pressure to reduce deficits, the CPB will likely remain a target of budget cuts—and not only from Republicans; even President Obama’s bipartisan deficit reduction committee proposed to eliminate funding for the CPB. If the CPB does eventually lose federal funding, the impact will be variable across affiliates, and some of its programs then might be shown on commercial cable stations, possibly with federal subsidies.<sup>18</sup>

Supporters of the system contend that it provides special services that commercial television neglects because they lack mass appeal. Innovations pioneered by public broadcasting have spread to commercial broadcasting, these supporters say. For example, public broadcasting played a leading role in developing captions for individuals with hearing impairments. At the turn of the century, it led in pioneering digital television, including interactive news and feature programs. Public radio and public television were among the first to move to satellite distribution, which made it possible to deliver multiple national programs to communities. Nonetheless, the future of public broadcasting seems precarious.

## Patterns of Private Ownership

---

The overarching feature of media ownership in the United States is that it is predominantly in private hands; media companies and outlets operate primarily as for-profit businesses. Arrangements vary from individual ownership, where one person owns a newspaper or radio or television station, to ownership by corporate conglomerates. Owners include small and large business enterprises, labor groups, religious and ethnic organizations, and many other types of interest groups in society. Explaining private media control patterns is relatively simple; agreeing on their consequences is not.

**Table 2-2 Public Broadcasting Revenue by Source, 2008–2017**

Year	Individual Giving	Underwriting
2008	\$252,188,412	\$191,368,970
2009	\$266,879,214	\$169,783,646
2010	\$273,641,191	\$169,662,827
2011	\$297,404,887	\$170,980,687
2012	\$301,896,974	\$183,138,683
2013	\$316,851,081	\$183,378,779
2014	\$329,574,209	\$195,853,661
2015	\$352,159,144	\$204,335,864
2016	\$362,070,403	\$209,451,245
2017	\$383,819,720	\$211,637,752

*Source:* Individual giving and underwriting revenue for local public radio news stations. (2021, June 29). *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.journalism.org/fact-sheet/public-broadcasting/>

*Note:* Figures are based on revenue for the 123 largest news-oriented public radio licensees (in U.S. dollars).

## Business Configurations

*Independents* is the term used to describe individuals, families, or corporations that own a single media venture and little else. They are increasingly rare in the media business. Various forms of multiple ownership or *media chains* have become the norm. In media chains, individuals or corporations own several media outlets—mostly radio or television stations or cable channels or newspapers. The Gannett Company is a good example. Gannett owns more than 100 local media properties in the United States, including the giant *USA Today* and hundreds of nondaily publications. It was recently acquired by New Media Investment Group, Inc., now its parent company. The deal brought 263 media outlets across 47 states together under the same ownership umbrella, the properties of which reach over 145 million unique visitors a month.<sup>19</sup> The predictable consequence of chain ownership has been a large degree of homogeneity in news offerings.<sup>20</sup>

*National and regional chains* control a majority of daily papers in the United States.<sup>21</sup> Like the Gannett Company, most of these newspaper

groups also own nondaily papers. The proportion of circulation controlled by chain-owned papers has been on the rise in recent years. Although individual papers within chains generally enjoy editorial page autonomy, they tend to be more uniform in making political endorsements than is true for independently owned papers.<sup>22</sup>

Many of the major media companies own several chains of media outlets across platforms. When media enterprises own different types of media, it is called *cross-media ownership*. Although the arrangement carries the usual advantages of giant enterprises—ample resources for good performance and economies of scale—it is worrisome when one company controls all (or most) of the news media in a single local market. It diminishes the chance for democratic dialogue. Efforts to use the government's regulatory powers to curb cross-media ownership in the United States have been applied at both the national and local level. Rules exist to limit cross-ownership within local media markets; other rules limit the national reach of any one media company. Despite their existence, these regulations and further regulatory efforts have been continually stymied by powerful lobbying by large media enterprises.<sup>23</sup>

Because its leadership is appointed by partisan presidents, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has intermittently favored loosening constraints on cross-media ownership. The FCC position on ownership restrictions typically depends on party control of the White House. Following the 2016 presidential election, looking forward to the return of a friendlier Republican administration, big media redoubled their efforts to persuade the FCC to further loosen restrictions. In November 2016, the News Media Alliance, a consortium of big media groups, moved quickly to urge president-elect Trump to drop remaining ownership restrictions, arguing that the regulations are no longer appropriate in the fragmented and increasingly competitive news business. The group contended that while news organizations are struggling to innovate and adapt to the digital media environment, outdated policies are dampening investment and growth.<sup>24</sup>

A *market* is the geographic area served by a media outlet and where it typically attracts a substantial audience. For instance, each television station has a signal that can be received clearly by people living within a certain radius of the station. All of the people within that radius who can receive the signal are considered to be within the market. Television media markets are classified as designated market areas (DMAs). Residents in a given media market are generally exposed to much of the same programming, allowing for some variation across cable providers and packages. Newspapers also serve geographic markets, which often roughly map to the town, city, or county level. Program sponsors and those advertising in newspapers pay for advertising based on how well the demographics of

the media market audiences match the ideal consumer for their products or services. By owning many local television stations or newspapers, large media companies may supply news for more than a hundred markets and therefore reach a broad consumer base for advertisers.

A fourth type of ownership is the *conglomerate*—individuals or corporations that own media enterprises along with other types of businesses. CBS Corporation, General Electric, and the Walt Disney Company are examples. They own the CBS, NBC, and ABC networks. Along with Fox, these four major television networks supply most of the content broadcast by U.S. television stations. Conglomerate ownership raises fears that the companies' nonmedia business interests may color their news policies. If, for instance, there is a need to reduce the size of the military or to oppose construction of a missile system, the management of a conglomerate such as General Electric, which holds many defense contracts, may examine these questions from a biased perspective in the media outlets that it controls. A significant amount of early research on the effects of media ownership examined these kinds of conflicts of interest. In a recent study, Catie Snow Bailard found that newspapers owned by parent companies who stood to benefit economically from campaign finance changes resulting from the *Citizens United v. Federal Elections Commission* (2010) decision covered it more favorably.<sup>25</sup>

In major urban centers, most media fall into the media chain, cross-media, and conglomerate classifications. For instance, the two major media companies that used to be the Tribune Company—Tribune Publishing and Tribune Media—reach enormous proportions of audiences in major markets around the country. Tribune Publishing owns 10 daily newspapers and 60 digital properties in major markets such as Los Angeles, Chicago, and Orlando. Tribune Media's holdings include 42 owned or operated broadcast stations, one radio station, and one national cable outlet, along with the websites associated with these enterprises.<sup>26</sup> Despite early intentions to avoid cross-ownership and market dominance, most of the major outlets in several of the top media markets are owned by the national television networks and conglomerates or members of conglomerates. Two prominent examples are the Chicago market, ranked third among the top 100 media markets, and Dallas–Fort Worth, ranked fifth.<sup>27</sup>

Radio and television stations that remain under single ownership are, for the most part, small with comparatively weak signals. The number of media outlets controlled by various entrepreneurs ranges widely and fluctuates considerably, especially in an era of widespread consolidation. Since the turn of the century, many news media companies have added multiple websites to their holdings as well as online versions of their newspapers and television programs.

Recent research suggests a different classification of media ownership if the goal is to understand how ownership influences content. This work argues that it is the governance structure and profit orientation of media outlets' parent companies that influence the nature and quality of news coverage. Specifically, the content produced by many news outlets is influenced by the structure and nature of its ownership, both of which shape profit-making considerations in conjunction with the outlet's financial health and competitive standing in the market. For example, parent companies fully owned and controlled by public shareholders have a fiduciary responsibility to provide a profitable return on investments for stockholders. Under this model, profit maximization is the overarching goal of the organization, which means that content is driven by the preferences of audiences and advertisers. These outlets are most vulnerable to demand-side bias in which the makeup of the market can produce biases by suggesting certain compilations of audience tastes. Typically, this translates into news coverage that is less substantive, more sensational, and more negative in tone. When news organizations are concerned about profit at the expense of all else, they are more likely to offer political news content that is appealing to mass audiences—who tend to prefer more sensational, more negative, and less substantive news.<sup>28</sup> At times, these pressures can also produce coverage that is slanted or biased, particularly when outlets operate in markets with a clear preference for one side or another.<sup>29</sup>

Recent years have witnessed the rapid emergence of a new media ownership type—one born from acquisitions of media companies by hedge funds, private equity firms, and owners with investment backgrounds. For these hedge fund owners, the primary purpose of media acquisitions is to turn a profit, much to the dismay of critics already weary of corporate media consolidation. Hedge fund owners are known for purchasing distressed media outlets for a bargain price, then slashing the staff and reporting profits. Several notable examples link hedge fund purchases to major newsroom layoffs.<sup>30</sup> A major concern is that this new class of owners is likely to accelerate the already ongoing declines in the nation's news-reporting capacity.<sup>31</sup>

Under more concentrated parent company ownership structures, content may be less subject to audience preferences but is more vulnerable to owner influence over content.<sup>32</sup> One owner or family has a limited set of ideological or issue preferences that are easily handed down or inferred by editors and journalists, making control over content much easier than for a large group of diverse shareholders. When shareholders have competing or varied ideas, this somewhat frees editors and journalists from top-down pressure.

The ten largest media owners as ranked in 2019 reflect a mix of conglomerates, publicly and privately owned media companies, and hedge fund owners (see Table 2-3).

## The Costs and Benefits of Big Business Control

---

Strong trends toward consolidation in the media industry have given a few very large organizations a great deal of control over the news that reaches the American public.<sup>33</sup> Is it sound public policy to allow such consolidation? Does it bring undesirable uniformity and lead to neglect of local needs? Does it prevent diverse viewpoints from reaching the public? In short, what are the advantages and disadvantages of big business control over substantial portions of the public's news supply?

On the plus side of the ledger, producing television programs and gathering news worldwide are expensive tasks. Only large, well-financed organizations capable of spreading their costs are able to spread their costs over many customers can provide the lavish media fare that attracts ample audiences. Compared to small, individually owned enterprises, large enterprises can more readily absorb the losses that are often incurred in producing expensive documentaries and public service programs. Large enterprises also can spend more money on talented people, research, investigations, and costly entertainment shows. Nonetheless, these advantages are bought at a high price. The brilliant, full spectrum of viewpoints that could be available has been contracted and grayed, and fresh new talents have far fewer opportunities to come to the fore.

Until more recently, many of the worst fears about the consequences of big business dominance have proved largely groundless. For years, media mergers generated little systematic change in the uniformity of news; the simultaneous multiplication of cable, satellite, and internet television diversified the media marketplace in some respects, even if not to the extent once anticipated.<sup>34</sup> Nor was there solid evidence that media giants squelch antibusiness news or uniformly and routinely favor conservative political orientations.<sup>35</sup> For example, there has been ample antibusiness news that has tarnished such business giants as Microsoft, Nike, Wal-Mart, Merck, and the major tobacco companies.<sup>36</sup> However, while we know what was covered, outside the newsroom, it is difficult to know much about what stories were squelched.

More evident is that serious news has been increasingly replaced by “infotainment” in the wake of mergers of news enterprises with entertainment giants, especially when the public prefers such shows to hard news

**Table 2-3 Ten Largest Owners in 2019, Ranked by Number of Papers Owned**

Rank	Owner Name	Owner Type	Total Papers	Daily Papers	Total Circulation
1.	Gannett/ Gatehouse	Public/ Investment	613	262	8,596,000
2.	Digital First/ Tribune	Public/ Investment	207	70	5,163,000
3.	Lee/BH Media	Public/ Investment	170	84	2,464,000
4.	Adams Publishing Group	Private	158	40	1,233,000
5.	CNHI	Investment	112	71	993,000
6.	Ogden Newspapers	Private	84	49	851,000
7.	Paxton Media Group	Private	75	42	575,000
8.	Boone Newspapers	Private	65	29	458,000
9.	Community Media Group	Private	57	14	331,000
10.	Landmark Media Enterprises	Private	55	3	443,000

Source: Abernathy, P. M. (2020). The new media giants. *Hussman School of Journalism and Media, University of North Carolina*. <https://www.usnewsdeserts.com/reports/news-deserts-and-ghost-newspapers-will-local-news-survive/the-news-landscape-in-2020-transformed-and-diminished/the-new-media-giants/>.

offerings. Further, studies suggest that the various business configurations of for-profit media outlets do shape their profit orientations, the degree to which they focus on local issues, and the amount of hard news they offer. The jury is still out on whether an ample supply of hard news or an

adequate diversity of viewpoints remains available when also taking into account the news available on cable stations, news radio, and the internet, but the subject is hotly debated.<sup>37</sup>

Despite that many of the original fears about consolidation proved groundless, two recent trends have raised or revived concerns among critics of consolidation. Research from Penelope Muse Abernathy at the UNC Hussman School of Journalism and Media shows that despite numerous closures and steeply declining circulation among local newspapers, newspaper-owning chains are larger than ever (Figure 2-2). A report from early 2020 predicted continued growth and consolidation, including the formation of “highly leveraged mega-chains formed by the union of large publicly traded newspaper companies with large hedge funds and private equity chains.”<sup>38</sup> The report also documents continued growth among privately held regional newspaper chains. Media watchers find these trends troubling for several reasons. First, this kind of substantial consolidation in the news industry shifts many editorial decisions to a handful of people running a few very large corporations. Second, these large, centralized corporations are removed from (and lack strong ties with) the local communities in which their papers are located. This reduces their ability to understand and meet the information needs of local communities and their citizens. Third, continued consolidation with large, publicly traded chains and hedge fund owners means more ownership and control by those ownership types most associated with massive newsroom layoffs and prioritizing profits over gathering and reporting the news.

For the most part, concerns about consolidation revolve around its possible detrimental effects on localism and diversity of perspectives. However, one growing media chain, Sinclair Broadcasting (Photo 2-1), has been controversial due to more than its efforts to rapidly acquire media properties across numerous markets. Sinclair has also drawn sharp criticism for its lack of localism in coverage and its ideologically tinged editorial practices in which the owners require their affiliates to insert right-leaning editorial content—now called *must-run* segments—into the local news program without acknowledging on air that the material is mandated from the top-down. A now infamous video clip from 2018 shows anchors from thirty of 294 Sinclair affiliate stations simultaneously parroting identically worded complaints about liberal media bias. These *must-run* segments were also the subject of a scathing commentary on HBO’s *John Oliver, Last Week Tonight*.<sup>39</sup> While Americans and the professional norms of journalism have grown more accommodating to partisan news programming since the arrival of cable, many would prefer local television news to remain focused



**Photo 2-1 Sinclair Broadcasting in Spotlight After Viral Video Shows Local TV Anchors Reading Identical Script Lambasting Fake News**

*Source:* Photo by Win McNamee/Getty Images.

on what's relevant to the local community and less steeped in national partisan politics. The fact that Sinclair already owns 186 stations in 87 markets makes any surreptitious insertions of ideological content troubling.<sup>40</sup>

Obviously, current policies designed to reduce media concentration and encourage local programming have failed to meet their objectives. The merits of these policies must be reconsidered, keeping in mind the media's mandate to serve the public interests of a democratic society. It has also become clear over many decades that most efforts to put broadcast media into a regulatory harness are doomed to fail because owners with major stakes in this business sector maintain close ties with high-level politicians who need their support for winning public office and promoting policies.

## **The Impact of New Media on the Media Marketplace**

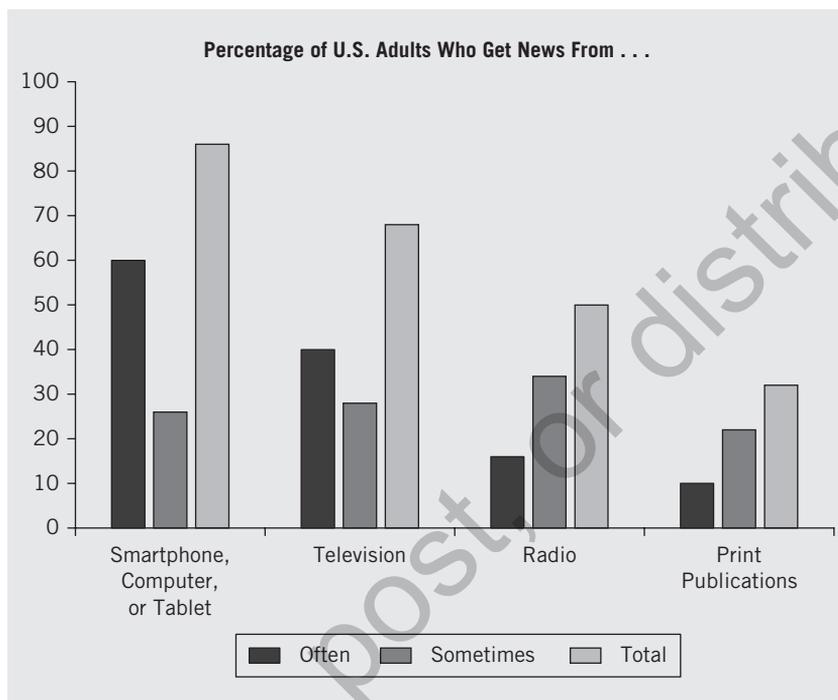
Digital media continues to have a marked impact on the structure and behavior of news media enterprises, providing alternative avenues for both news consumers and political elites. These avenues not only provide emerging sources of news for the public but outlets for public officials or other

parties to circumvent mainstream media. Newsmakers and ordinary citizens alike are increasingly adept at using digital and social media to get their message directly out to the public without any filtering from the mainstream media<sup>41</sup> and at successfully highjacking or controlling the media narrative. The Trump presidency showcased these trends well. During the 2016 election, Donald Trump was highly effective on social media in two ways: first by racking up a huge following on social media and second by earning constant coverage of his tweets on traditional media. Trump earned 12 million Facebook likes compared to Clinton's 7.8 million, had 12.9 million Twitter followers to Clinton's 10.2 million, and issued 33,000 tweets to Clinton's 9,500.<sup>42</sup> The 2016 election also showcased a more sinister use of digital and social media—the purposive dissemination of fake news. Throughout the Trump administration and the 2020 presidential campaign, social media remained central to presidential and candidate communications. Early contenders for the Democratic nomination used social media platforms to announce candidacies and campaign appearances and to work toward the general goal of seeming relatable and authentic, albeit with mixed success.<sup>43</sup>

The term *digital media* refers to the growing number of electronic forms of communication made possible through computer technologies. These include microblogging (or blogging), content sharing, and social networking websites such as Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Likee, and Snapchat, most of which dabble in news and politics while primarily functioning as social networking.<sup>44</sup> Use of social media for news among adults remains high but is no longer growing. In 2016, roughly 60% of U.S. adults reported getting news on social media and nearly 20% reported doing so often. Recently, this trend has reversed, possibly due to declining trust in information on the platforms, with more Americans getting digital news on websites or apps (68%) or search engines (65%) than social media (53%). One source of continued growth is mobile news use. A large majority of Americans—at 86%—report getting their news on a digital device sometimes (26%) or often (60%), while only 68% say the same of television.<sup>45</sup> (See Figure 2-1.)

The most profound effect of the new media on the news media business springs from the multiplication of outlets that distribute news and other forms of content. This trend of media fragmentation or expanding media choice means that, in combination, there are nearly as many providers of digital news as potential consumers of their services. Now, thanks to mobile technology, these channels and platforms are available to most people all the time. This imbalance between supply and demand has created a chaotic marketplace in which news suppliers compete for audiences and advertisers in novel ways. Many traditional media institutions have been

**Figure 2.1** Modes for News Consumption Among U.S. Adults, 2020



Source: Adapted from Shearer, E. (2021, January 12). More than eight-in-ten Americans get news from digital devices. *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/01/12/more-than-eight-in-ten-americans-get-news-from-digital-devices/>. Report is based on data from a survey of U.S. adults conducted August 31–Sept 7, 2020.

weakened by the struggle—local newspapers in particular—and some have succumbed as we have discussed.<sup>46</sup> But there are many survivors, and some of them, such as local and network television news, remain popular.<sup>47</sup> The coronavirus outbreak and associated downturn had variable effects on media industries, hitting newspapers hard while providing a much-needed shot in the arm for television news (See Figure 2-2).<sup>48</sup>

The vast majority of digital media news providers produce very few, if any, original stories. They largely feed off news collected by the traditional media, who use their shrinking corps of journalists to report ongoing events. This is yet another reason why the declining ranks in the American newspaper reporting capacity is troubling. New media news distributors

elaborate stories gathered by old media, often interpreting them from distinct perspectives. They have captured fragments of old media audiences. The three original networks—ABC, CBS, and NBC—which once supplied news to three-quarters of the nightly audience, now serve closer to a third.<sup>49</sup> However, most digital news consumers continue to use old-style news sources alongside the new media.

As a consequence of sharpening competition in the news media marketplace, owning media enterprises has become less profitable and even unprofitable in many instances. To cope with tough economic conditions, some media empires have divested themselves of large chunks of their holdings, adding a movement toward deconcentration to the more common movement toward excessive concentration in the media business sector. For example, Gannett, Tribune, and E. W. Scripps dumped their print properties in a series of spin-offs in 2014. The reason for the divestitures is that print media are a drag on reported earnings. Though newspapers continue to earn profits, the growth isn't enough to satisfy corporate investors.<sup>50</sup> Unfortunately, the most recent data suggest that print media have not fared well since the separation relative to their counterparts.<sup>51</sup> And evidence suggests that the trend in deconcentration was a short one—more consolidation is occurring across digital and traditional media.<sup>52</sup> Already, a majority of online news offerings come from providers owned by twenty media titans such as Time Warner and General Electric. Hundreds of smaller companies share the remainder. Concentration remains alive and well (see Table 2-3).

Strained economic conditions forced some old media into bankruptcy, and some shut down operations in the face of impending financial collapse. Still others sharply cut costs by sharing resources, trimming staffs and the scope of news gathering, and shutting down bureaus, especially abroad. The upshot is a reduction in the scope and quality of coverage of serious news and an increase in human-interest stories that are inexpensive to produce.<sup>53</sup>

The growth of digital media has thinned out traditional media, but many survive and continue to innovate. As in previous communications revolutions, newcomers—such as the telephone, radio, or television in earlier ages—have forced the industry to adjust; they have not wiped them out.<sup>54</sup> Traditional media eventually learned many ways to adapt new technologies to their own needs. For example, newspapers, along with television and cable stations, have created websites and mobile apps and have cultivated a sustained presence on social media. The news collected for the traditional enterprise now does double duty by serving the needs of the digital platforms as well. In fact, much of the information collected by reporters that the traditional media could not publish in the past because

Figure 2.2 Total Estimated Circulation of U.S. Daily Newspapers, 2000–2018



Source: Adapted from Newspapers fact sheet. (2021, June 29). Pew Research Center. <https://www.journalism.org/fact-sheet/newspapers/>.

Notes: Data for 2000–2014 were obtained from Editor & Publisher; data for 2015–2018 are based on estimates from Pew Research Center analysis of Alliance for Audited Media (AAM) data. Data are missing for 2010. For 2015 onward, researchers analyzed the year-over-year change in total weekday and Sunday circulation using AAM data and applied these percentage changes to the previous year's total. Only those daily U.S. newspapers that report to AAM are included; affiliated publications are not included in the analysis. Weekday circulation only includes those publications reporting a Monday–Friday average. For each year, the comparison is for all newspapers meeting these criteria for the three-month period ending Dec. 31 of the given year. Comparisons are between the three-month averages for the period ending Dec. 31 of the given year and the same period of the previous year.

of space and time constraints is now available on the Web and is often distributed via links through the organizations' or journalists' Twitter feeds. It enriches the old-style media because they can refer audience members to the expanded offerings. In addition, digital platforms allow dissemination of breaking news when it happens, rather than waiting for scheduled editions and broadcasts, which restores the traditional media's scooping ability. They can once again be the first to break a story.

## Box 2-1

### The Return of Independent Media Owners?

Media observers were intrigued when Amazon founder Jeff Bezos announced in August 2013 that he would buy *The Washington Post*. With his vast wealth and technological know-how, the hope was that Bezos could chart a path forward for the newspaper business, which was in steep decline because of internet-driven changes in advertising and readership patterns.

Three years later, the *Post* emerged as a notable success story, reporting that it had achieved profitability even as it had increased its costs by adding some 140 journalists to its newsroom.<sup>1</sup>

How did Bezos do it?

First, he resolved a long-standing internal debate about whether the *Post* should be a regional or a national newspaper by repositioning the *Post* as a national digital news source. Online traffic grew exponentially, and for much of 2016, the *Post* competed head-to-head with *The New York Times* in having the largest digital audience of any American newspaper—about 100 million unique visitors per month, according to the web metrics firm comScore.<sup>2</sup>

Second, Bezos leveraged the *Post* with Amazon, offering the paper's national digital edition—an inexpensive magazine-like app for tablets and mobile devices—at reduced rates through Amazon Prime and on the Kindle Fire. This was no doubt a key to what the *Post* claimed was a rapid increase in paid digital subscribers (it does not report subscriber data).

At a public forum in October 2016, Bezos explained his strategy for the *Post* in terms reminiscent of the “get big fast” philosophy he had embraced in building Amazon into a retail behemoth:

We need to move from making a relatively large amount of money per reader on a relatively small number of readers . . . to a model where we make a very small amount of money per reader on a much much larger number of readers.<sup>3</sup>

But perhaps Bezos's most important step was that he chose to run the *Post* as a privately owned institution. Over the course of several decades, hundreds of daily newspapers had been acquired by publicly traded corporations, many of which eliminated jobs in their newsrooms in order to boost

earnings for the benefit of their shareholders. The legendary Graham family, from whom Bezos purchased the *Post*, had taken the *Post* public in the 1970s and thus had to answer to Wall Street and its demands for quarterly profits. Although the Grahams were dedicated to the view that journalism was a public trust, they lacked the freedom that Bezos had to take the long view and build the *Post* as he saw fit.

Under executive editor Martin Baron, a Graham holdover retained by Bezos, the *Post* was fearless in covering the 2016 presidential campaign, breaking big stories about dubious practices at the Clinton and Trump foundations and revealing the existence of a tape on which Donald Trump was heard bragging about sexually assaulting women. Trump banned the *Post* and several other news organizations from his campaign events and threatened to investigate Amazon's tax status.

A wealthy, independent newspaper owner can afford to stand up to power—provided they are willing to do so. Referring to a crude threat against then-publisher Katharine Graham delivered by one of Richard Nixon's henchmen, John Mitchell, during the Watergate scandal, Bezos once said, "I have a lot of very sensitive and vulnerable body parts. If need be, they can all go through the wringer rather than do the wrong thing."<sup>4</sup>

During an era when the role and credibility of the news media have come under increasing attack, news organizations such as the *Post*, and tough-minded owners such as Bezos, will prove to be essential in standing up to political pressure so they can meet the information needs of the public in a democratic society.

1. For an in-depth discussion of *The Washington Post* under Jeff Bezos, see Kennedy, D. (2016, June 8). The Bezos effect: How Amazon's founder is reinventing *The Washington Post*—and what lessons it might hold for the beleaguered newspaper business. *Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy*. <https://shorensteincenter.org/bezos-effect-washington-post>. The *Post's* claim that it had achieved profitability came in the form of a message to the staff from publisher Frederick Ryan; Beaujon, A. (2016, December 13). *The Washington Post* says it was profitable in 2016. *Washingtonian*. <https://www.washingtonian.com/2016/12/13/washington-post-profitable-2016>.
2. *The Washington Post* records nearly 100 million visitors in October, greatly exceeding previous traffic records. (2016, November 14). *The Washington Post*. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/pr/wp/2016/11/14/the-washington-post-records-nearly-100-million-visitors-in-october-greatly-exceeding-previous-traffic-records/?utm\\_term=.abcb01f14513](https://www.washingtonpost.com/pr/wp/2016/11/14/the-washington-post-records-nearly-100-million-visitors-in-october-greatly-exceeding-previous-traffic-records/?utm_term=.abcb01f14513)

(Continued)

(Continued)

3. Watch full panels from the *Vanity Fair* new establishment summit 2016. (2016, October 19). *Vanity Fair*. <http://www.vanityfair.com/news/2016/10/vf-summit-livestream>
4. Graham, K. (1997). *Personal history*. Alfred A. Knopf, p. 465; Washington Post Live. (2016, May 20). Jeff Bezos wants to see an entrepreneurial explosion in space. *The Washington Post*. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-live/wp/2016/04/07/meet-amazon-president-jeff-bezos/?utm\\_term=.1fff329180ce](https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-live/wp/2016/04/07/meet-amazon-president-jeff-bezos/?utm_term=.1fff329180ce).

Dan Kennedy is an associate professor of journalism at Northeastern University. His book on Bezos and other wealthy newspaper owners, *The Return of the Moguls: How Jeff Bezos and John Henry Are Remaking Newspapers for the Twenty-First Century*, was published in 2018 by ForeEdge.

Privatization is another major consequence of new media proliferation. When media properties are owned by publicly traded corporations, bottom-line concerns are paramount. If their published reports show that the media segments of the business are not as profitable as expected, management feels pressured to change the situation, often at the expense of the quality of media offerings. Such unwelcome pressures have produced a trend to privatize major media. Jeff Bezos's purchase of *The Washington Post* is a noteworthy example (see Box 2-1). While privatized media ultimately need to be economically viable so they can pay their operating costs, they are not forced to show the large profit margins to which media owners have been accustomed in the past. They also are less subject to public scrutiny, making media operations less transparent.

Further loosening of the economic constraints that currently hobble news media operations may be in the offing. Wealthy philanthropists such as Bezos have indicated their willingness to operate high-quality media on a break-even basis or to subsidize their operations. One subsidy example is ProPublica, a nonprofit investigative service that develops news stories and then offers them free to existing news organizations or assists news organizations in developing their own stories.<sup>55</sup> That is an exciting development because it points to a move away from news media as profit-making businesses to a system of media focused on public service that deserves support from private philanthropies. Yet we must remember that any major change in the system of media financing will not change the age-old fact that whoever pays the piper controls the tune. We can only guess what the new tune would be.

## Media Influence Variables: Prestige, Market Size, and Competition

One cannot judge the sweep of control exercised by any group of news media owners merely by looking at the number of outlets. Three additional factors need to be considered: prestige of each media institution, market size, and competition within the market. The prestige a media enterprise enjoys is an important component of its political influence. Journalism has widely accepted standards of professionalism, as do law, medicine, and engineering. As part of this system of norms, certain members and products are accepted widely as models for the profession. Other news professionals watch what information the high-prestige news organizations present, how they present it, and what interpretations they give to it; they then adjust their own presentations accordingly. Critics derisively call this the “jackal syndrome” or “pack journalism.” For political news, *The New York Times* is the lion whom the jackals follow. In television, major networks are models for the profession, strengthening the trend toward news uniformity. The many voices in the media marketplace sing in unison much of the time. Newcomers quickly join the chorus and hum the tunes orchestrated by the prestige leadership.

Media enterprises also gain influence based on the size of their market rather than the total number of markets accessible. The hundreds of newspaper and broadcast markets in the United States vary widely in audience size. In such major metropolitan areas as New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles, a market with a fifty-mile radius may have a population of several million. The same radius for a station in Wyoming might cover more cows than people. In the digital era, metrics of audience size and influence are based on unique visitors to websites, minutes per site visit, minutes per site visitor, audience reach, and click-through rates.

Competition within most media markets used to be quite limited. A single newspaper and a handful of radio and television stations were the rule. That picture changed dramatically in the wake of technology advances. Nonetheless, most Americans still get the bulk of their political news from mainstream television, although digital news consumption has surpassed newspapers and radio as sources of public affairs news, and news websites continue to see the most audience growth.<sup>56</sup> It still means something to have extensive reach in local media markets through traditional media outlets. The extent to which market-level media concentration will remain an issue of concern will depend on future patterns of consolidation across digital media companies and traditional media companies.

Another factor to consider in gauging the influence of various media enterprises is the composition of their audiences in terms of age, education, and income (see Box 2-2 for an examination of news audience demographics). However, numbers may be deceptive because the fragmentation of news channels and the multiplication of news content on entertainment programs make it hard to judge people's news sources. Evidence shows that most Americans who consume news on social media also get news from a variety of other sources. It is important to recall that much of the internet consumption is done via website or app-based versions of mainstream newspapers and television.

## Box 2-2

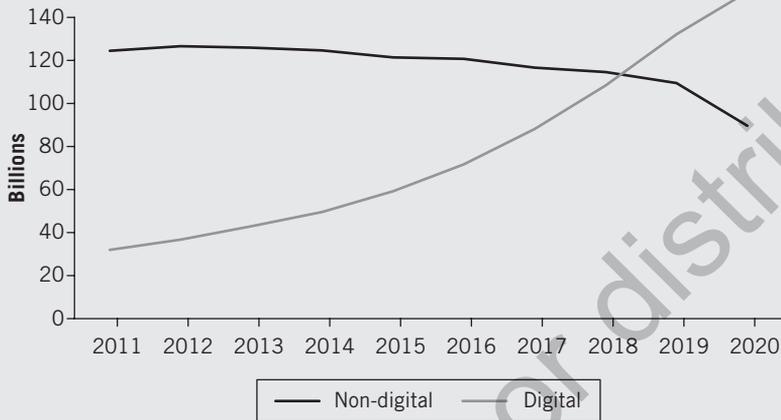
### Audiences Under the Microscope

Demographic differences matter hugely when it comes to audiences for various types of media. This is especially true in the digital era. Not only are there large age differences across users of digital and traditional media, but there are also vast differences across social media and manner of access. For example, 41% of social media users ages 30 to 49 get news on Facebook, compared to 22% of 18- to 29-year-olds. On Instagram, that pattern is reversed: 47% of the 18–29 bracket get news on Instagram compared to only 37% of those ages 30–49.<sup>1</sup> The maturing young—mid-20s to mid-30s—are most prized by news organizations. That age group is likely to have reasonably good income in various job categories and to spend a good portion of it on big-ticket purchases such as furniture, appliances, electronics, and cars. Garnering young families as audience members equates to attracting advertisers who are willing to pay high rates for the chance to reach as many young eyeballs and readily opened, full wallets as possible.

Of course, not all media venues cater to the young. There are venues that cater to older audiences, to partisan audiences, to the prosperous, to the politically sophisticated, and to many others. Given that preferences for news varies to some degree along demographic lines, targeted offerings that cater to specific needs and likes are a good thing. It also makes it essential to be knowledgeable about the range of tastes for news among Americans.

Figure 2-3 is instructive. In 2018, digital advertising surpassed non-digital advertising for the first time. It reflects, among other things, the great migration of audiences to mobile devices, especially among young people. Ad dollars follow the habits of audiences.

Figure 2-3 Annual Digital and Non-Digital Advertising Revenue (in U.S. Dollars, Billions)



Source: Adapted from Digital news fact sheet. (2021, July 27). *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.journalism.org/fact-sheet/digital-news/>. Data obtained by Pew Research Center from eMarketer, U.S. Ad Spending Estimates.

1. Shearer, E., & Mitchell, A. (2021, January 12). News use across social media platforms in 2020. *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.journalism.org/2021/01/12/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-in-2020/>.

## New Ways to Pay for News

The decline in readers, viewers, and listeners brought about by audience defections to the internet plunged the legacy media into serious financial difficulties. This is particularly the case for the print media, where bankruptcies became common during the recession that started in 2007. Many newspapers went out of business entirely; others cut back on the number of publication days, and still others abandoned their hard copy operations and published Web versions only. Nearly all companies, including flagship enterprises, cut staff, reduced the scope of news gathering, and replaced hard news with cheaper, softer news in hopes of retaining their dwindling audiences. Still, profits continued to plunge. The financial shocks led to reconsideration of the main financial underpinnings of the private sector press in the United States, based on the firm belief that the news values of old-style journalism must survive.

First, a look at the traditional financial structures: The pillars of financing for a profit-reliant press are advertiser support, audience payments, and government subsidies. Each has different policy consequences, which become blurred when they are used in combination, as is common. Print media, for example, are financed by the price audiences pay for newspapers and, more importantly, by revenue from advertisers. They also received government subsidies in the form of below-cost mailing rates.

The revenue system fell apart when earnings from advertising, which are pegged to audience size, plunged as audiences defected to the internet. Some advertisers also defected to internet outlets but never in large enough numbers to make advertising a financial pillar for online information providers. In fact, outlets with small audiences, or audiences that are unattractive to advertisers because they represent small markets, may never be able to attract enough sponsors to pay for their operations. That then raises questions about who, in the long run, will pay for the expenses of website news operations, especially if they strive for excellence. Good journalism is expensive. What will happen if the alternative—reliance on unpaid, unskilled, and unaccountable amateurs—proves unacceptable in the long run? More recently, several prominent news organizations began charging for access to their digital content. Configurations of the pricing and delivery methods vary widely, and there is little evidence as yet about which of these new business models will prove successful.

To cope with reduced revenues, traditional media tried to cut costs in various ways. These include news-sharing arrangements, drastic staffing cuts, and combining multiplatform operations.<sup>57</sup> As mentioned, the legacy networks also expanded into their own Web enterprises, so the same news production operation can serve traditional and new media platforms. Journalism training has changed accordingly, forcing new graduates to become adept in handling traditional and emerging formats.

Most new media broadcast facilities, along with cable television, rely heavily on audience payments. These generally take the form of monthly service charges for programs, plus installation or equipment charges. Additional programming may be available for a flat monthly rate or on a per-program basis. Service-charge financing for broadcasting is accepted abroad. In the United States, however, it initially met with resistance because good broadcast services were available everywhere free of charge. By the mid-1980s, much of the initial resistance to paying for broadcasts vanished. Many U.S. households were paying for special programs in addition to their standard monthly fees. Today, cable reaches most American households; the average number of channels per household is around 160.

A major social drawback of service charges for broadcasts is that poor families who need many of the specialized programs are unable to pay for them. Middle-income families, who already enjoy many social advantages, benefit most from the information resources available through new media platforms; low-income people who lack access fall further behind.<sup>58</sup> The problem can be reduced through government subsidies paid to cable and internet companies or directly to the poor. Direct payment to citizens seems preferable in that it avoids making media enterprises financially dependent on the government and thereby hampering their freedom of action.

The need for a new business model is clear when the I-beam of media financing—advertising money—no longer bears the load of expenses for news production and distribution and when people below middle-class economic status cannot afford service charges for news and entertainment. Newspapers are trying to stop the hemorrhaging in novel ways because website readers are not yet the financial equivalent of hard copy readers.<sup>59</sup> Other models for financing old and new media operations are government financing or financing by privately controlled foundations such as the Knight Foundation, help in news production from university centers such as those at Columbia University or Northwestern University, and grants from individual philanthropists such as billionaire George Soros. Another experimental model for investigative journalism involves the creation of freestanding research centers that employ professional reporters to cover particular types of news. Examples are the Center for Public Integrity in Washington, DC, and New York-based ProPublica. Such centers can operate in a way similar to their predecessor, the Associated Press (AP), which functions as a membership association. Payment of a membership fee entitles the member organization to use AP news reports. Instead of using membership fees, news-gathering associations, which usually are nonprofits, are operated by private entrepreneurs or by foundations. Their products can be available for a fee or they can be distributed free of charge. Such organizations can also produce particular stories on demand for news organizations that lack the resources to do the necessary work on their own. Regardless of the source of financial support, the financial supporters are likely to influence the thrust of the news product to some degree. That is an important consideration in deciding which model for financing high-quality news is best for preserving the independence of the press—be it the control methods of the past, the internet free-for-all model of citizen journalism, a government or nonprofit subsidized model, some form of subscription for access to news websites or payment for individual articles, or a mixture of several of these.

## The Regulation/Deregulation Debate

---

When the FCC compared the number of broadcast news outlets available to Americans living in communities of various sizes at the dawn of the 21st century, it found that, on average, the number of outlets had more than tripled since 1960. Congress had ordered the research to ascertain whether it was time to scrap rules restricting companies from owning multiple news enterprises in the same market. The rules were designed to ensure that the limited number of broadcast frequencies would represent a wide spectrum of interests. The conclusion of majorities in Congress, hotly disputed by the minority, was that a substantial loosening of restrictions was in order because advancing technology has multiplied available channels. Besides, companies eager to increase their holdings claimed that economies of scale would allow them to improve their offerings. They would also be better able to compete with unregulated cable and satellite television and the internet.

Opponents of deregulation have pointed out that large conglomerates, such as Viacom and News Corporation, already control the most popular stations and often share programs and content across media holdings within the larger media parent company, contrary to the government's communication diversity goals. They also claim that loosening the existing restrictions encourages replacing local programming with bland, generic coverage suitable for large, diverse markets. The competition between giant corporations and smaller enterprises, similar to the fight between supermarkets and mom-and-pop grocery shops, invariably ends with the giants garnering most of the rights to exclusive stories and most of the advertising revenues while the smaller economic base crumbles.

Opponents of deregulation point out that deregulation of radio in 1996 led to a frenzy of mergers that ended with a handful of giant corporations, led by Clear Channel and Infiniti Broadcasting Corporation, dominating the industry. Clear Channel grew from 43 to more than 1,200 stations nationwide. Altogether, 21 companies had each acquired more than 40 stations.<sup>60</sup> Some observers hailed this development as beneficial to consumers because larger companies have more resources to produce sophisticated programming. Others condemned it as a major disaster that shrank the diversity of offerings and reduced experimentation and creativity.

Despite the strong pressures for deregulation in the United States at the dawn of the 21st century, the federal government continues to regulate private electronic media to ensure that they "serve the public interest, convenience, and necessity," as mandated by the Communications Act of 1934 and its 1996 counterpart. The FCC, a bipartisan body appointed

by the president and confirmed by the Senate, handles most regulation.<sup>61</sup> The FCC was a seven-member body until the summer of 1984, when, for financial reasons, Congress downsized it to five commissioners. In 1986, the appointment term was shortened from seven to five years, ensuring faster turnover of commission personnel and greater control by the government. In theory, the commission is an independent regulatory body. In practice, congressional purse strings, public and industry pressures, and presidential control over appointment of new members, including naming the chair, have greatly curtailed the FCC's freedom of operation. The commission's independence is weakened also because its rulings can be appealed to the courts, which frequently overturn them. Conflicting political pressures from outside the agency as well as internal political pressures further limit FCC policy making, so it tends to be "a reactive rather than an innovative system sluggish to respond to change in its environment, particularly to technological change. . . . Clearly there are problems with this kind of policy making system."<sup>62</sup> On balance, the FCC's record of setting goals and enforcing its rules has earned it the reputation of being at best an ineffective watchdog over the public interest and at worst an industry-kept, pressure group–dominated lapdog.

The FCC controls only over-the-air television. Cable television and the internet have been excluded because they are considered *common carriers*—channels that carry information compiled by others rather than originating their own information. U.S. print media are also beyond the FCC's reach thanks to the press clause of the First Amendment. However, similar to cable and the internet, print media are subject to general laws such as those limiting monopolies and trusts. These regulations become operative when the eight largest firms in a particular type of business control more than half of the market and the twenty largest firms control three-quarters or more. Concentration in the news media business has remained substantially below these levels. The Justice Department does permit economically weak newspapers to combine their business and production facilities free from antitrust and monopoly restraints, as long as their news and editorial operations are kept separate.

FCC control takes four forms: rules limiting the number of stations owned or controlled by a single organization, examination of the goals and performance of stations as part of periodic licensing, rules mandating public service and local interest programs, and rules to protect individuals from damage caused by unfair media coverage. Although none of these rules prescribes specific content, all of them were designed to increase the chances that content would be diverse and of civic importance.

In practice, none of the rules have been effective enough to overcome the pull of political and market forces, including the dawning of the internet age. Despite the mushrooming of broadcast enterprises, the news diet that most Americans consume is surprisingly uniform, politically lightweight, and dominated by oligopolies. Licensing has become almost automatic with minimal quality controls. When processing licenses, the FCC usually looks at the mix of programs, the proportion of public service offerings, and the inclusion of programs geared to selected minorities and interests. It does not scrutinize the subject matter of broadcasts in detail.

Compared with regulatory agencies in other countries, even in western Europe, Canada, and Australia, the FCC controls the electronic media with a very light hand. The members of the FCC could, if they wished, rigorously define what constitutes “programming in the public interest.” They could enforce FCC rulings more strictly and verify that stations are meeting their public service and local programming obligations before renewing their licenses. The threat of license withdrawal for rule violations could be used as a powerful deterrent to misbehavior and a strong guide to programming. That does not happen because political cross-pressures are strong, including the fear that FCC enforcement could impair press freedom. Besides, the FCC staff is much too small to cope with all their assigned duties. The FCC’s performance in protecting individuals from unfair publicity has been somewhat stronger.

## Other Media Controls

---

Given the FCC’s relatively light touch, what are the other means of controlling mass media policies? Various special interest groups—typically associated groups from the media or advertising industry—have substantial political or financial interest in mass media policy. These lobbying groups represent one set of pressures on media policy; citizen lobbying groups provide another source.

### Pressures by Media Associations and Advertisers

Media lobbies are another means of controlling mass media policies. Radio and television interests, especially the networks and their affiliated stations, are active lobbyists. Most belong to the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB), a Washington, DC, lobby that is powerful despite the diversity and often clashing interests of its members. A number of trade associations and publications also lobby, often at cross-purposes. For

newspapers, the American Newspaper Publishers Association, now merged with several other press associations, has been one of the most prominent groups. These organizations try to influence appointments to the FCC and to guide public policies affecting new technologies that may threaten established systems or practices. For instance, the network lobbies for many years tried to stifle cable television and to acquire control over domestic satellites. The National Cable Television Association and the NAB have used members' stations to urge support for their policy recommendations. On other occasions, such as the passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, they have tried to downplay coverage that might arouse unwanted opposition. Presently, conditions are uncertain for anti-regulation advocates. The White House is no longer in the hands of a pro-business Republican. At the same time, revenues continue to decline in some sectors of traditional media, exemplifying the case for mechanisms to free up capital for innovation and investment. Media groups may be able to capitalize on these circumstances to win the day for further deregulation.

To forestall regulation on content by outside bodies, the media industry has developed mechanisms for self-control. The NAB has had a radio code since 1929 and a television code since 1952 that set rules on program content and form. The NAB modernizes both codes periodically. Individual codes in major broadcast enterprises and codes adopted by the Council of Better Business Bureaus have supplemented or superseded industrywide codes. Print press self-policing has developed along similar lines. Scholars, too, have set forth codes of journalism ethics.

Most codes are quite vague, mandating honesty, fairness, independence, and concern for the public interest. Media outlets then decide what these principles mean in practice. Overall, the impact of industrywide codes has been limited. They typically apply only to organization members that explicitly subscribe to them. Penalties for code violations have been minimal. The codes have been useful in blunting demands by pressure groups for government intervention to set and enforce standards. For instance, congressional leaders lifted a threat to pass laws limiting excessively violent and sexually explicit shows on programs available to children in return for industry promises to develop a rating system to guide parents.

In the 1970s, advertisers began to influence program content by withdrawing their commercials from programs they considered obscene or excessively violent. Sears Roebuck was one of the earliest and largest advertisers to do so. McDonald's, American Express, and AT&T refused to place commercials on such shows. Other large advertisers, such as Procter & Gamble, retained consultants to seek out acceptable programs for their advertisements and avoid unacceptable ones. With advertisements on such

top-rated shows as the Super Bowl yielding millions per thirty-second spot, threats of withdrawal have had some impact on programming.<sup>63</sup>

While reductions in programs featuring sex and violence have been welcome, other changes have been problematic. There is deep concern that advertisers, spurred by pressure groups, may become unofficial censors. For instance, General Motors canceled its sponsorship of an Easter program on the life of Jesus because evangelical groups objected to the content. A CBS documentary on gun control, opposed by the gun control lobby, suffered crippling withdrawals of advertising. Fearing similar punishments from fundamentalist religious groups, the networks have refused advertising designed to instruct viewers about the use of condoms for protection against unwanted pregnancies and AIDS. Such unofficial censorship at the behest of advertisers impairs press freedom.

## Citizen Lobby Control

Citizens' efforts to affect the quality of broadcasting began in earnest in 1966, when the Office of Communication of the United Church of Christ, a public interest lobby, challenged the license renewal of WLBT-TV in Jackson, Mississippi, accusing the station of discriminating against African American viewers.<sup>64</sup> At the time, 45% of Jackson's population was African American. The challenge failed, but it was the beginning of efforts by many other citizens groups to challenge license renewals.

Citizen groups won a major victory in 1975 when the FCC refused to renew the licenses of eight educational television stations in Alabama and denied a construction permit for a ninth because citizen lobbies had charged racial discrimination in employment at the stations. There also had been complaints that the stations unduly excluded programs dealing with affairs of the African American community.<sup>65</sup> Since then, numerous stations have yielded to pressure for increased minority employment and programming rather than face legal action. It is one of many examples that demonstrate that the threat of legal action is a powerful stimulant of social behavior.

During the 1980s, many citizens groups formed to lobby for better programming and tighter government controls. They represented a broad array of ideological viewpoints and a variety of demographic groups. Despite the substantial impact of such groups on FCC rule-making and licensing procedures, citizen lobbying efforts at the national level have declined somewhat since the 1980s and have never regained their original vigor. One reason has been the difficulty of sustaining citizen interest over time; others were lack of financial support and loss of leadership. The broadcast lobby defeated efforts to obtain public funding for citizens'

lobby groups, and foundation support has dried up. Many groups also were discouraged when an appeals court reversed substantial victories won in the lower courts and when the U.S. Supreme Court voided the 1996 Communications Decency Act.<sup>66</sup> Some citizens' groups have redirected their energy into local lobbying to ensure that cable systems in their locality serve the interests of various publics at reasonable prices to consumers.

In addition to the more than sixty organizations concerned exclusively with media reform, other organizations, such as the Parent–Teacher Association (PTA), the National Organization for Women, and the American Medical Association, have lobbied intermittently on a variety of media issues. They have shown concern about stereotyping, access to media coverage and to media employment and ownership, advertising on children's programs, and enforcement of FCC program regulations. The groups' tactics include monitoring media content, publicizing their findings, and pressuring broadcasters, advertisers, media audiences, and government control agencies. PTA members have pressured advertisers, who in turn have succeeded in reducing the number of violent programs shown in the early evening. Legal maneuvers have ranged from challenges of license renewals to damage suits for the harmful effects of media content.

Assessing the precise influence of these organizations is difficult because many of their goals overlap with other forces that affect media policy. Some of the causes for which they have worked, such as measures fostering good programming for children, have prospered over the years, however, and part of the credit undoubtedly belongs to them. Yet these groups have a long road to travel before they can match the influence enjoyed by the broadcast lobby in protecting its interests even when they run counter to the concerns of many citizens.

## SUMMARY

---

We have examined the most common types of ownership and control of the news media in this chapter. While most of the media establishment is in private sector hands, the federal government plays an important role as well. It owns and operates vast overseas radio and television enterprises and partially controls a far-flung system of domestic public television and radio broadcasting that provides an alternative to commercial programming. For the average American, the government-controlled systems are peripheral, and privately owned print and electronic media enterprises are the focus of concern.

The major political problems in the private sector are concentration of ownership of media in the hands of large business conglomerates and concentrated control over the production of news and entertainment programs. Scrutiny of the impact of the existing system on the quality of the news showed that business ownership has enhanced the focus on soft news and entertainment at the expense of serious political news that citizens need to perform their political roles. But it has not led to programming dominated by business perspectives, as many observers feared, nor has coverage of local news withered in the wake of media mergers. Large enterprises, rather than small ones, have excelled in providing news and entertainment.

In this chapter, we have also outlined the major changes in the news media system spawned by the mushrooming of novice news providers that populate and crowd the internet. We found that as yet, the newcomers have remained a limited influence. The traditional media, thanks to creating their own digital content and strategically acquiring some of the more popular newcomers, are retaining their market dominance. In addition, we examined the regulatory structures created by the federal government to ensure a diverse supply of information. We found that enforcement of regulations has been weak, primarily because it is a political football kept in play by multiple powerful stakeholders.

The multiplicity of influences at work in making news and entertainment programs makes it impossible to assess the precise impact of those influences on media content in general or even on a particular story. In the next chapter, we will focus on major aspects of news production for additional clues to the mystery of what shapes the news.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

---

1. How are public, semipublic, and private media different? Which form dominates the U.S. media system? What are the potential drawbacks and benefits for the nature of our media system?
2. What are the different forms of private media ownership? Which of these forms are most common, on the rise, or in decline in the U.S.? Are there any trends about which we should be concerned? Why or why not?
3. What are the various factors that have influence over the content of news? Which factors do you think matter most? Are there any factors or resulting patterns in coverage to be particularly concerned about?

4. Why has media regulation and deregulation been such a source of debate in the U.S.? Who are the stakeholders, and which side seems to be winning or losing?
5. What are some of the other forces, beyond regulation and economics, that attempt to control media? Have they reached any level of success over the years? Do you expect the influence of these sources (or any others) to continue in the years to come? Why or why not?

## READINGS

---

- Ali, C. (2017). *Media localism: The policies of place*. University of Illinois Press.
- Berry, M. (2019). *The media, the public and the great financial crisis*. Springer.
- Birkinbine, B., Gómez, R., & Wasko, J. (Eds.). (2016). *Global media giants*. Routledge.
- Campbell, R., Martin, C. R., & Fabos, B. (2015). *Media and culture: An introduction to mass communication* (10th ed.). Bedford/St. Martin's.
- Hamilton, J. T. (2004). *All the news that's fit to sell: How the market transforms information into news*. Princeton University Press.
- Hill, F. B., & Broening, S. (2016). *The life of kings: The Baltimore Sun and the golden age of the American newspaper*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Kennedy, D. (2013). *The wired city: Reimagining journalism and civic life in the post-news-paper age*. University of Massachusetts Press.
- Kohl, U. (2017). *The net and the nation state: Multidisciplinary perspectives on Internet governance*. University of Chicago Press.
- Napoli, P. M. (2007). *Media diversity and localism: Meaning and metrics*. Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Napoli, P. M. (2011). *Audience evolution: New technologies and the transformation of media audiences*. Columbia University Press.
- Napoli, P. M. (2019). *Social media and the public interest: Media regulation in the disinformation age*. Columbia University Press.
- Pickard, V. (2015). *America's battle for media democracy: The triumph of corporate libertarianism and the future of media reform*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ponce de Leon, C. L. (2015). *That's the way it is: A history of television news in America*. University of Chicago Press.
- Schlosberg, J. (2016). *Media ownership and agenda control: The hidden limits of the information age*. Routledge.
- Webster, J. (2016). *The marketplace of attention: How audiences take shape in a digital age*. MIT Press.
- Wu, I. S. (2015). *Forging trust communities: How technology changes politics*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

## NOTES

---

1. Schulhofer-Wohl, S., & Garrido, M. (2013). Do newspapers matter? Short-run and long-run evidence from the closure of *The Cincinnati Post*. *Journal of Media Economics*, 26(2), 60–81; Rubado, M. E., & Jennings, J. T. (2019). Political consequences of the endangered local watchdog: Newspaper decline and mayoral elections in the United States. *Urban Affairs Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1078087419838058>; Gentzkow, M., Shapiro, J. M., & Sinkinson, M. (2011). The effect of newspaper entry and exit on electoral politics. *American Economic Review*, 101(7), 2980–3018.
2. Campante, F., & Do, Q.-A. (2014). Isolated capital cities, accountability and corruption: Evidence from U.S. States. *American Economic Review*, 104, 2456–2481.
3. Snyder, J., & Stromberg, D. (2010). Press coverage and political accountability. *Journal of Political Economy*, 118, 355–408. <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/652903>
4. Hayes, D., & Lawless, J. (2015). As local news goes, so goes citizen engagement: Media, knowledge, and participation in U.S. House elections. *Journal of Politics*, 77, 447–462. <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/679749>; Hopkins, D. J. (2018). *The increasingly United States: How and why American political behavior nationalized*. University of Chicago Press.
5. Trussler, M. (2020). Get information or get in formation: The effects of high-information environments on legislative elections. *British Journal of Political Science*, 1–21; Peterson, E. (2019). Paper cuts: How reporting resources affect political news coverage. *American Journal of Political Science*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12560>; Hayes, D., & Lawless, J. L. (2018). The decline of local news and its effects: New evidence from longitudinal data. *Journal of Politics*, 80(1), 332–336.
6. Hallin, D. C., & Mancini, P. (2004). *Comparing media systems: Three models of media and politics*. Cambridge University Press. This book describes different government control styles in selected Western democracies.
7. See the Top 10 lists maintained by Nielsen at <http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/top-ten/>. Examples of shows from the Top 10 (February 2021) are *Firefly Lane* (Netflix), *Bridgerton* (Netflix), *Wandavision* (Disney+), *The Crown* (Netflix), and *Longmire* (Netflix). Also see Hamilton, J. T. (2004). *All the news that's fit to sell: How the market transforms information into news*. Princeton University Press.
8. See Kleinman, A. (2017, December 6). Porn sites get more visitors each month than Netflix, Amazon and Twitter combined. *HuffPost*. [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/internet-porn-stats\\_n\\_3187682](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/internet-porn-stats_n_3187682).
9. Koblin, J. (2018, January 31). Trump's State of the Union ratings don't match Obama's (but beat the Grammys). *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes>

.com/2018/01/31/business/media/trumps-state-of-the-union-ratings-dont-match-obamas-but-beat-the-grammys.html

10. Bagdikian, B. H. (2004). *The new media monopoly*. Beacon Press; Picard, R. (2008). The challenges of public functions and commercialized media. In D. Graber, D. McQuail, & P. Norris (Eds.), *The politics of news, the news of politics* (2nd ed.). CQ Press. For a negative view of the “marketplace of ideas” concept, see Ginsberg, B. (1986). *The captive public: How mass opinion promotes state power*. Basic Books, pp. 98–148.
11. See VOA. (n. d.). *VOA history*. <https://www.insidevoa.com/p/5829.html>; VAOA. (n. d.). *About VOA*. <https://www.insidevoa.com/p/5831.html>.
12. See Corporation for Public Broadcasting. (n. d.). *About CPB*. <https://www.cpb.org/aboutcpb>
13. A content analysis of political discourse on PBS led to the conclusion that its stories focused primarily on the strategic aspects of domestic politics and the economy and featured the views of political elites, especially insiders drawn from the government and the business world. Hoynes, W. (2002). Political discourse and the “new PBS.” *Press/Politics*, 7(4), 34–56.
14. See PBS National Sales. (2021). *Reach a quality audience*. <https://www.pbs.org/sponsorship/audience/>
15. See NPR Press Releases and Statements. (2020, November 11). NPR digital platforms see largest audience ever. NPR. <https://www.npr.org/about-npr/933918860/npr-digital-see-largest-audience-ever>
16. See National Public Media. (n. d.). *NPR audience*. <https://www.nationalpublicmedia.com/Audience/#audiences>
17. Wylie, J. (2020, February 10). Trump budget attain proposes zeroing out public broadcasting funds. *Current*. <https://current.org/2020/02/trump-again-seeks-cpb-funding-cuts-in-proposed-budget/>
18. Burlij, T. (2011, March 17). U.S. House votes to cut NPR funding. *PBS*. <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/2011/03/us-house-votes-to-cut-npr-funding.html>; Erb, K. P. (2012, October 4). Romney promises to cut taxpayer funding for PBS (but says he still loves Big Bird). *Forbes*, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/kellyphillipserb/2012/10/04/romney-promises-to-cut-taxpayer-funding-for-pbs-but-says-he-still-loves-big-bird>; Farhi, P. (2011, April 12). NPR, public television won’t get budget ax. *The Washington Post*. [http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/npr-public-television-wont-get-budget-ax/2011/04/12/AF5CtwSD\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/npr-public-television-wont-get-budget-ax/2011/04/12/AF5CtwSD_story.html). For an impassioned analysis of the trials and tribulations of U.S. public television, see Ledbetter, J. (1997). *Made possible by . . . the death of public broadcasting in the United States*. Verso.

19. Hansen, D. (2019, November 20). Gannett shareholders sign off on GateHouse deal. *Washington Business Journal*. <https://www.bizjournals.com/washington/news/2019/11/14/gannett-shareholders-sign-off-on-gatehouse-deal.html>
20. Mitchell, A., Holcomb, J., & Weisel, R. (2016, June). State of the news media 2016. *Pew Research Center*.
21. Mitchell, A., Holcomb, J., & Weisel, R. (2016, June). State of the news media 2016. *Pew Research Center*.
22. Media critic Dean Alger claims that quality deteriorates when papers are acquired by a chain; Alger, D. (1998). *Megamedia: How giant corporations dominate mass media, distort competition, and endanger democracy*. Rowman and Littlefield, pp. 180–182. Other research suggests that concentration of ownership and control influences editorial independence in the newsroom; Hanretty, C. (2014). Media outlets and their moguls: Why concentrated individual or family ownership is bad for editorial independence. *European Journal of Communication*, 29(3), 335–350. For a more recent example, see Martin, G. J., & McCrain, J. (2019). Local news and national politics. *American Political Science Review*, 113(2), 372–384.
23. Federal Communications Commission. (n. d.). [Website]. <http://www.fcc.gov>; see also Chester, J. (2002). Strict scrutiny: Why journalists should be concerned about new federal and industry deregulation proposals. *Press/Politics*, 7(2), 105–115.
24. Eggerton, J. (2016, November 30). Media alliance to Trump: Dump cross-ownership rules. *Broadcasting and Cable*. <http://www.broadcastingcable.com/news/washington/media-alliance-trump-dump-cross-ownership-rules/161481>
25. Bailard, C. S. (2016). Corporate ownership and news bias revisited: Newspaper coverage of the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* ruling. *Political Communication*, 33(4), 583–604.
26. Tribune Media. (2016, August 14). *Tribune Media company completes spin-off of its publishing business*. <http://www.tribunemedia.com/tribune-media-company-completes-spin-off-of-its-publishing-business>.
27. Foote, K. (2012, July 12). Brief history of DFW's crowded media market. *CBS DFW*. <http://dfw.cbslocal.com/2012/07/12/a-brief-history-of-a-crowded-dallasfort-worth-media-market>. See also News Generation. (2016, April). *Top 100 media markets*. <http://www.newsgeneration.com/broadcast-resources/top-100-radio-markets>.
28. Hamilton, J. T. (2004). *All the news that's fit to sell: How the market transforms information into news*. Princeton University Press; Dunaway, J. (2013). Media ownership and story tone in campaign news coverage. *American Politics*

- Research, 41, 24–53; Dunaway, J. (2008). Markets, ownership, and the quality of campaign news coverage. *Journal of Politics*, 70(4), 1193–1202.
29. Mullainathan, S., & Shleifer, A. (2005). The market for news. *American Economic Review*, 95(4), 1031–1053; Baron, D. P. (2006). Persistent media bias. *Journal of Public Economics*, 90, 1–36; Gentzkow, M., & Shapiro, J. (2010). What drives media slant? Evidence from U.S. daily newspapers. *Econometrica*, 78(1), 35–71.
  30. Pompeo, J. (2020, February 5). The hedge fund vampire that bleeds newspapers dry now has *The Chicago Tribune* by the throat. *Vanity Fair*. <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2020/02/hedge-fund-vampire-alden-global-capital-that-bleeds-newspapers-dry-has-chicago-tribune-by-the-throat>
  31. Abernathy, P. M. (2020). *News deserts and ghost newspapers: Will local news survive?* University of North Carolina Press; Peterson, E., & Dunaway, J. (2020). *The new news barons: Investment ownership reduces newspaper reporting capacity*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association.
  32. Hanretty, C. (2014). Media outlets and their moguls: Why concentrated individual or family ownership is bad for editorial independence. *European Journal of Communication*, 29(3), 335–350.
  33. McAlone, N. (2016, November 11). Insiders say the 2017 “frenzy” of media consolidation predicted by vice’s CEO is about to arrive: Here’s why. *Business Insider*. <http://www.businessinsider.com/2017-media-consolidation-frenzy-is-coming-2016-11>
  34. Benson, R. (2016). Institutional forms of media ownership and their modes of power. In M. Eide, L. O. Larsen, H. Sjøvaag (Eds.), *The journalistic institution reexamined*. Intellect; Hamilton, J. T. (2004). *All the news that’s fit to sell: How the market transforms information into news*. Princeton University Press. For contrary views, see Alger, D. (1998). *Megamedia: How giant corporations dominate mass media, distort competition, and endanger democracy*. Rowman and Littlefield, pp. 153–194; McChesney, R. W. (1999). *Rich media, poor democracy*. New Press. See also McAllister, M. P., & Proffitt, J. M. (2020). Media ownership, autonomy, and democracy in a corporate age. In L. Wilkins & C. G. Christians (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of mass media ethics*, p. 465; Humprecht, E., & Esser, F. Diversity in online news: On the importance of ownership types and media system types. *Journalism Studies*, 19(12), 1825–1847.
  35. Bennett, L., & Cook, T. E. (1996). Journalism Norms and News Construction: Rules for Representing Politics. *Political Communication*, 13(4).
  36. Manheim, J. B. (2001). *The death of a thousand cuts: Corporate campaigns and the attack on the corporation*. Erlbaum.

37. Dunaway, J. (2013). Media ownership and story tone in campaign news coverage. *American Politics Research*, 41; Hindman, M. (2009). *The myth of digital democracy*. Princeton University Press.
38. Abernathy, P. M. (2020). *News deserts and ghost newspapers: Will local news survive?* University of North Carolina Press.
39. Last Week Tonight. (2017, July 3). *Sinclair Broadcast Group: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver (HBO)* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GvtNyOzGogc>
40. Chang, A. (2018, April 6). Sinclair's takeover of local news, in one striking map. *Vox*. <https://www.vox.com/2018/4/6/17202824/sinclair-tribune-map>
41. Rosentiel, T. (2012, March 19). The state of the news media 2012. *Pew Research Center*. <http://www.pewresearch.org/2012/03/19/state-of-the-news-media-2012>.
42. Goidel, K., & Gaddie, K. (2016, November 3). The wildcatters: The twitter candidate, social media campaigns, and democracy. *The Huffington Post*. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-wildcatters-the-twitter-candidate-social-media\\_us\\_581b5211e4b0f1c7d77c968d](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-wildcatters-the-twitter-candidate-social-media_us_581b5211e4b0f1c7d77c968d)
43. Verhovek, J. (2019, January 11). In the 2020 campaign, candidate social media posts of visits to the dentist, enjoying a beer and more pull back the curtain: Some 2020 hopefuls are embracing a more personal social media style. *ABC News*. <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/2020-campaign-candidate-social-media-posts-visits-dentist/story?id=60311500>
44. Facebook reached 69% of U.S. adults by 2019 while Twitter reached 22%; for both sites, most users access the site via mobile devices. YouTube reaches the highest percent of U.S. adults at 73%; Social media fact sheet. (2019, June 12). *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/social-media/#which-social-media-platforms-are-most-popular>.
45. Gottfried, J., & Shearer, E. (2016, May 26). News use across social media platforms 2016. *Pew Research Center*. <http://www.journalism.org/2016/05/26/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2016>.
46. For example, 2015 saw newsroom employment and investment continue to fall, and more newspaper companies saw losses in 2015 relative to 2014; Barthel, M. (2016, June 15). Newspapers: Fact sheet. *Pew Research Center* <http://www.journalism.org/2016/06/15/newspapers-fact-sheet>.
47. Barthel, M. (2016, June 15). 5 key takeaways about the state of the news media in 2016. *Pew Research Center*. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/06/15/state-of-the-news-media-2016-key-takeaways>.
48. Barthel, M., Matsa, K. E., & Worden, K. (2020, October 9). Coronavirus-driven downturn hits newspapers hard as TV news thrives: The financial state

- of the U.S. news media in the second quarter of 2020. *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.journalism.org/2020/10/29/coronavirus-driven-downturn-hits-newspapers-hard-as-tv-news-thrives/>
49. Webster, J. (2016). *The marketplace of attention: How audiences take shape in a digital age*. MIT Press.
  50. Carr, D. (2014, August 10). Print is down, and now out: media companies spin off newspapers, to uncertain futures. *The New York Times*. [https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/11/business/media/media-companies-spin-off-newspapers-to-uncertain-futures.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/11/business/media/media-companies-spin-off-newspapers-to-uncertain-futures.html?_r=0).
  51. Williams, A. T. (2016, August 9). Newspaper companies lag behind their broadcast siblings after spinoffs. *Pew Research Center*. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/08/09/newspaper-companies-lag-behind-their-broadcast-siblings-after-spinoffs>.
  52. Abernathy, P. M. (2020). The news landscape in 2020 transformed and diminished: The new media giants. *Hussman School of Journalism and Media, University of North Carolina*. <https://www.usnewsdeserts.com/reports/news-deserts-and-ghost-newspapers-will-local-news-survive/the-news-landscape-in-2020-transformed-and-diminished/the-new-media-giants/>
  53. Peterson, E. (2019). Paper cuts: How reporting resources affect political news coverage. *American Journal of Political Science*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12560>
  54. Bimber, B. (2003). *Information and American democracy: Technology and the evolution of political power*. Cambridge University Press.
  55. About us. (2021). *ProPublica*. <https://www.propublica.org/about/>
  56. Gottfried, J., & Shearer, E. (2016, May 26). News use across social media platforms 2016. *Pew Research Center*. <http://www.journalism.org/2016/05/26/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2016>.
  57. Martin, G. J., & McCrain, J. (2019). Local news and national politics. *American Political Science Review*, 113(2), 372–384; Peterson, E. (2019). Paper cuts: How reporting resources affect political news coverage. *American Journal of Political Science*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12560>
  58. DiMaggio, P., & Hargittai, E. (2001). From the “digital divide” to “digital inequality”: Studying internet use as penetration increases. *Princeton: Center for Arts and Cultural Policy Studies, Woodrow Wilson School, Princeton University*, 4(1), 4–2.
  59. Patterson, T. E. (2007, August). *Creative destruction: An exploratory look at news on the internet*. Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy. [https://shorensteincenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/creative\\_destruction\\_2007.pdf](https://shorensteincenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/creative_destruction_2007.pdf).

60. Patterson, T. E. (2007, August). *Creative destruction: An exploratory look at news on the internet*. Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy. [https://shorensteincenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/creative\\_destruction\\_2007.pdf](https://shorensteincenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/creative_destruction_2007.pdf).
61. 47 U.S.C.A. §307(a), 1934.
62. Krasnow, E. G., Longley, L. D., & Terry, H. A. (1982). *The politics of broadcast regulation* (3rd ed.). St. Martin's Press, p. 284.
63. The Associated Press. (2008, September 22). GM won't advertise during Super Bowl. NBC. [http://www.nbcnews.com/id/26842347/ns/business-us\\_business/t/gm-wont-advertise-during-super-bowl/#.WMngGfkrLic](http://www.nbcnews.com/id/26842347/ns/business-us_business/t/gm-wont-advertise-during-super-bowl/#.WMngGfkrLic).
64. *Office of Communication of the United Church of Christ v. FCC*, 359 F.2d 994 (D.C. Cir. 1966).
65. Krasnow, E. G., Longley, L. D., & Terry, H. A. (1982). *The politics of broadcast regulation* (3rd ed.). St. Martin's Press, pp. 54–62.
66. *Reno v. American Civil Liberties Union*, 521 U.S. 844 (1997).