



INTERVIEW
BEN BAGDIKIAN

Q: WHAT DO YOU MEAN WHEN YOU SPEAK OF THE MEDIA MONOPOLY?

Bagdikian: Well the media is increasingly owned by a few very large multinational corporations. By the media, newspapers, magazines, books, movies, television and radio. This is growing. You know, we think of as our formative picture of monopolies, William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer, who dominated the media scene from the late 19th century when there was mass printing. But compared to those, the new media giants are a totally different magnitude, and they encompass more powerful media - radio, television for example. So that what we have is maybe anywhere from 20 to a half a dozen huge corporations who have the dominant media voice in the media absorbing world, especially in the developed world - and now, getting a foothold in the less developed world.



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And that means that inevitably people who have such power see the world in a particular way. And when they have dominance, as with candy manufacturers and automobile manufacturers, the less competition there is, the more control they have on what economists would call price and quality. In cases of the media and when we're talking about the news, price is one thing, quality means how much and what kind of news will you give. And what we're seeing in the media now is a decrease in hard reporting as a proportion of the whole, and an increase of soft entertainment features - which are the least expensive to produce and the most revenue producing. Because if you look at the main section of any good newspaper, that's not where most of the ads go, because when you're in a very serious mood - your aunt has Alzheimers and you're reading about Alzheimers Disease or there's been a catastrophe someplace or there's a political development that you're very interested in - a lot of the ads, especially on television, don't have much of an impact. But if you have it in the entertainment section, you are not in such a critical mood. you've having a good time. And like television commercials. they like fantasv

programs. That's why even very popular serious documentaries don't make as much money, because in the midst of a documentary on the Rwandan slaughter, the ad for Pepsi saying you'll stay young forever is laughable. But in the middle of a sitcom, which is already laughable (laugh), it's just absorbed without any critical analysis. So that if you control the media, you have control over things of this sort. And now what we have in daily newspapers in the United States, we have about 15 hundred cities that have a daily paper.

And in 99 percent of those cities there is only one paper in their city of origin. And that's an enormous amount of control. They aren't all the same. Some are better than others and some are worse than others. But even the best has a degree of control over what they'll print or not print, that is greater than if they had to worry about an aggressive competitor across the street.

Q: 60 MINUTES WAS A SEMINAL PROGRAM IN THAT IT WAS PURPORTEDLY HARD NEWS, BUT ALSO STARTED MAKING MONEY AND WHAT DID THAT DO?

Bagdikian: 60 Minutes, in terms of broadcast, was the best of times and the worst of times. It was the best of times in the sense that it did a lot of serious investigative reporting. Not all the stories were grave issues of our time, but they did some serious investigative reporting and really were a great relief from the lick and the promise that most local television was. The networks had stopped doing documentaries in the eighties. So these were things that went below the surface, on frequently important issues. But it was the worst in the sense that it was the first public affairs program that made money. And the networks had always, and the local stations had regarded news as a loss leader and audience collector for the money making entertainment programs in prime time. Suddenly, when 60 Minutes made a profit, every network executive and station manager in the country stood at attention and said my god, these people haven't been making any money, and we have to have our news make money. So what do you do when you want the news to make money? You don't spend so much money on chasing important stories, you get a lot of frou-frou because that'll attract the ads, and you get that horrid word and horrid idea, infotainment - which is supposed to be information that's in ..entertaining but it's neither good information nor good entertainment.

Q: SO YOU VIEW ONE OF THE CHANGES OVER THE LAST 20 YEARS AS THIS BLURRING OF INFORMATION AND ENTERTAINMENT.

Bagdikian: Yes. Now, it was true, from very early in television that it naturally paid attention to how the news giver looked, because in television you to have to project yourself. But that made the news person increasingly what we call a personality, or celebrity is what they really mean. And then, inevitably, they cared more about that person's hairdresser than what was beneath the hair - and you got just a pretty face, or just an earnest face.

Q: OR A DEEP VOICE.

Bagdikian: Yeah, or the crusader who pokes the finger in your eye on the screen. And it got to be more and more acting and less and less news. Or, the giggle programs, where inane pleasantries bounced back and forth, in between which they say oh yes, there was an ax murder in San Jose. And it's cheapened almost all of local news in commercial news. And that's because they discovered that you can make money on it. And most advertisers don't want people in a critical serious mood, and this solved the problem for the commercial broadcasters.

Q: WHAT ABOUT THE HISTORY OF THE TOBACCO INDUSTRY INFLUENCING WHAT GOT REPORTED ABOUT THE EFFECTS OF TOBACCO?

Bagdikian: If we think about our modern mass news, mass production news being about 120 years old in this country, then the treatment of news about tobacco and disease is one of the original sins of the media. Right from the beginning of mass newspapers, tobacco and disease as a subject was treated differently than all other news. It was a heavily advertised disease. For decades, there was suppression of medical evidence. I mean, pure, plain suppression. It simply did not appear, in almost all papers - including what we think of as our best papers. Then when the evidence got overwhelming, and what's more important, too much of the public knew about that evidence and had sick family members, they took another tack. They reported some of the medical evidence, but they equated it with the public relations releases of the Tobacco Institute. So that typically you see, in the thirties, for...no forties, fifties, early sixties things, Surgeon General reported collection of medical studies that showed that tobacco, heart lung disease. But the Tobacco Institute scientists denied that there was any causal link. And the tobacco companies to this day deny what they call a causal link.

You can't prove that because any given person has smoked, that that given person will get lung cancer or heart disease, or all the other things smoking produces. And someone has said, the tobacco companies won't admit there's a causal link until someone takes a malignant lung cell, puts it under a microscope, and the chromosomes spell Brown & Williamson. (laugh) And so, while things are much better today, the public is much too sophisticated to pay much attention to that, that there is still some reluctance to highlight that kind of thing. I think that's disappearing, I think now it is a disease that gets reported fairly regularly, or the set of diseases. But for a very long time, papers that used to seize upon every disease - muscular dystrophy, multiple sclerosis, cerebral palsy, huge articles, pictures of the pitiful victims - never had the same thing about the victims of tobacco.

Q: DO YOU THINK THAT NOW WE RISK GREATER INFLUENCE FROM CORPORATE POWER VIS A VIS TOBACCO AND OTHER INDUSTRIES AS WELL IN THE MEDIA, FROM THE THREAT OF LAWSUITS AND WITHDRAWAL OF COMMERCIAL ADVERTISEMENT?

Bagdikian: Oh, I think we do it in two ways. First is the spectacular business of their threatening CBS and ABC with 15 billion dollar lawsuits, and their shameful retreat. I say shameful, because I think before the takeover of the networks in the eighties, I don't think they would have backed down - you have to

guess about that, obviously - because it's a case that you can't lose in public relations, nor, I think, in the courts. I think a lawyer who worked with the networks, once the case was joined, would just love to get before a jury and trot the witnesses, the best medical authorities in the world, pitiful victims, and showing the data in big charts, and having the tobacco companies have to come in and say that their institute denies it all, and then proving that they tried to conceal what they knew. I mean there just really is too much evidence. But now.. But that would have cost money. CBS in the old days, I think would have recognized that when you get public

confidence and you're in news and public affairs reporting, that it's pure gold in the long run. And CBS enjoyed that for a long time - from the thirties when if you..something happened in the world. In England they tuned in, around many places in the world they tuned into the BBC. In the United States they turned to CBS. And that served CBS from the thirties, right through until, I would guess sixties, early seventies in television. So ..now that's a long run, a long run financial benefit as well as a public benefit, because you collect that audience and then turn them over to the prime time entertainment.. and CBS was number one. But we aren't playing for the long run in the American economy, including in a media economy. Whole staffs are fired and shifted around, executive vice presidents and vice presidents are moved because the quarterly earnings went down, the sweeps went down, and someone lost two tenths of a percent of a rating over somebody else. And so we're all in a short term game.

And in the process, the element that represents the public interest, which is more talked about than practiced - and even where it's practiced - became a smaller and smaller part. And that's true of news generally. Corporations, ever larger, that are in all kinds of businesses have embedded in them now, a news and public affairs function where there is public affairs reporting, that is ever a smaller part of the whole. So there's this huge empire, the leader of which is in some distant corporate headquarters, and has this small troublesome unit down here who doesn't obey the usual signals that come down the nervous system of a corporation. When the stock market took a slump in 1987, Jack Welch, the head of General Electric which owns National Broadcasting Company called Larry Grossman who was the president of NBC News at the time, said I hope that NBC News tonight will not say anything that will depress GE stock. Well when the head of a giant multinational corporation says to an employee 'I hope', most employees know that his wish is a command.

Now, news staffs resent that and resist it. But that's a powerful influence. And that shows that when you get a giant corporation in which the news is a relatively small part, there is not only less sensitivity about the news, it's usually headed..the corporation is headed by someone who did not grow up with the news and therefore absorb some of that traditional business that somehow the news is sort of sacred, sort of. But there is that feeling. People who come up in the news side feel you really shouldn't lie to the audience. People who come up in advertising say what's the newest way we can ..mm, if not lie, then at least distract people from anything negative about what want to say. And it's a very different dynamic. And so our subject commercial news is a more and more subject to that. It's true in newspapers to a lesser degree, but still ..you know, there are some fairly good papers, or highly regarded papers where they're telling the publishers and the business officers are telling reporters, you know, you have an obligation to the business community. They pay your salaries, they are part of the community, they deserve sympathy just the way accident victims deserve sympathy. And there goes the wall of separation between church

just the way ..accident victims deserve sympathy. And there goes the wall of separation between church and state, between news and business. It was always a porous wall, and now, self-righteously they run a bulldozer through it.

Q: DESCRIBE THE RESPONSIBILITIES THAT YOU THINK THE MEDIA, EVEN THOUGH IT IS A COMMERCIAL MEDIA, HAVE IN REGARD TO THE PUBLIC DIALOGUE IN ANY DEMOCRACY.

Bagdikian: Well, first on the print media, they're in the First Amendment. And while the First Amendment says you can print anything you want, you don't have to be responsible, you don't have to care about anything at all, you can really print anything you want - and that's one of the virtues of the First Amendment, you can say unpopular things. But it..for a medium that people really depend upon, there's implied moral obligation. Now it's implied, it's not explicit in the law - that because you have unusual power, that you have an obligation to serve the whole community, because the First Amendment was framed with the supposition that there would be multiple sources of information. I mean we had a time ..I mean I've been in the news business a distressingly long time. And the first paper I worked on was a city of a hundred thousand that had four daily papers. And if one paper ignored or missed something, another paper was very happy to pick it up.

They weren't terribly good papers, but you worried that you might miss something and that if you did, the other paper would get it. Also, in most cities, there were papers that pitched themselves at some significant part of the community that the other papers were not. So you tended to get the papers that were more consumer oriented, maybe labor union oriented, and others who were business oriented. You got different points of view that entered the community dialogue. And that was true nationally, so it entered the national dialogue. Now we have either monopoly newspapers, or we have broadcasting, commercial broadcasting which is so uniform in content, that if you brought in someone from Outer Mongolia and said we're gonna show you all four networks, or we're gonna show you cable, tell us the difference between them - I think they would be hard put to do it, both in terms of news and public affair..and entertainment. And we..so we get enormous uniformity and less of the discipline in which there's a sense we really owe something to the public. And there's a generation that forgets that there was a time when the FCC took seriously that people hold licenses and what the old act said was the public interest, convenience and necessity.

And when you've got a license for a community - this is 30 years ago - you had to tell the FCC well we think we should have our license because we have looked at the community and these are the things the community needs, and we think we can fill it better than the existing one because we will do this and this and this. The FCC never told them what to do, they said fine, go ahead. And at the end of their license period, they were supposed to go to the FCC, we think we should have it renewed because here's what we did for the public interest. That's gone. You don't have to do anything for the public interest anymore. Or the FCC looks at it and the Congress looks at it as something that isn't really serious. And the free market thinking, anything that pays is justified. And so what you see is the disappearance of a sense of obligation by the people who run networks, and a sense of obligation that's translated into doing some

things that are done even though they're not profitable but you think it's a good thing to do for the public common good. And I think the common good in most commercial broadcasting is out the window.

Q: DO YOU THINK THAT IN A CASE SUCH AS THE RECENT 60 MINUTES, THE SUFFOCATION OF THAT STORY OR DAY ONE AT ABC, THAT WE INCREASINGLY REACH A TIME WHERE JOURNALISTS OR EVEN NEWS EXECUTIVES OUGHT TO RESIGN OR THREATEN RESIGNATION TO GO ALONG?

Bagdikian: I know a lot of journalists, I've taught them for a while and they go into news, they go into broadcasting, they go into print. And what happens to some of the best people, not necessarily the executives, is that when things like that happen, they in effect say I don't want to be in this business anymore, and they leave. But those are quiet, they're not the big celebrities. I have to say.. Now I hesitate to say that anyone else should give up their job, someone else should stop paying their mortgage. But I had a feeling that something significant had passed, when no big shot at ABC or CBS saying I quit. Now, I don't want to be self righteous for somebody else's courage, but that would have made a difference. And they don't worry about paying their mortgage, they worry about you know, whether they'll..their stock options will come through, and whether their market holdings will do well. And also whether they will be hard to get rehired because big corporations don't like to hire troublemakers and whistle blowers and people who will not obey orders. But it would have.. you know, if I can be courageous for them, it would have done a great deal of good for news and for the public. As it is, I thought coercion won. The fact that now, the networks have suddenly discovered it's okay to do it 'cause it's out in the open air, somehow it makes it worse. This is a courageous thing to do, now that it's safe. Somebody else has belled the cat. (laugh)

Q: TALK ABOUT THIS IDEA THAT THEY DIDN'T DO IT WHEN IT WAS TOUGH.

Bagdikian: Yeah. One of the things politicians learn is that people listen when there's a controversy, when there is a crisis, a clash, an impasse. So when the tobacco companies threatened ABC and CBS with a huge lawsuit, public paid attention. While the public was paying attention, CBS and ABC said okay, we won't do it. Now later, after the Wall Street Journal broke the story and this man became public with his message about his claim that the tobacco companies had lied and suppressed evidence, then they said they would do it, the networks said they would do it. And I think that made it worse, 'cause in effect it was saying now that it's safe, we will be courageous. Somebody else took the heat and we will dash in and say we retrieved our honor. Well, as the Victorians say, honor lost can't be retrieved. So that I think that it was almost worse. It was ..it would have been somehow more honorable if they just quietly retreated into their corner and let things alone, rather than the bravado of saying now we will do it, now that it was perfectly safe.

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