

Joel Sullivan

VMA 111-WB: Mass Media, Fall 2012

Final Exam: Answer 4 out of 6 essay questions

1. "The relationship of money to Free Speech is the issue of the 21st century" (Bill Moyers in *Freedom of Speech for Sale*). In the light of this quotation, explain both the advantages and dangers of media ownership concentrated in only a few mega-corporations. According to Robert McChesney, and the movies *Free Speech for Sale* and *Orwell Rolls in His Grave*, why is such a concentration of corporate ownership a "threat to democracy"? Use specific examples from the readings and the viewings, and include in your discussion both what the function of the media should be in a democracy, and what the function of the media is in danger of becoming under the current system.

A healthy democracy requires both an informed, involved public and policymakers that are free to follow their conscience, not beholden to commercial interests. Unfortunately the concentration of media control into a few mega-corporations deprives our country of both these key ingredients of a healthy democracy.

The public can only make wise policy and electoral issues if they are informed about the key issues facing our country. However, a fully informed public is not in the best interest of the oligopoly that controls mass media. In particular, there is no one to hold the mega-corporations accountable for their actions. The mega-corporations can control public opinion to a large extent by determining what issues get news coverage. This is increasingly the case in America. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 chips away at what little checks and balances remain over the American commercial media.

The **advantages** of media deregulation and concentrated ownership of media are minimal compared to wise media regulation by a truly democratic government. However, America's deregulated media environment is healthier than a situation where the media is controlled by a totalitarian government. Deregulation at least contributes to the freedom of the media to criticize the government. However, this freedom is increasingly watered down as the channels of media

that would criticize government decisions are controlled by the same mega-corporations that shape government policy through lobbying.

The **disadvantages** of media deregulation and concentration of media ownership, in my opinion, far outweigh the advantages. The main disadvantage is the loss of a healthy channel for criticism of the mega-corporations that control media. Another disadvantage is that the prominent media control the topics of conversation. As Neil Postman said, “The media ... tell us what to think about.” Another disadvantage of media deregulation is that the consolidated mega-corporations that control media can afford to spend a great deal of money on lobbying. The larger the corporations get, the more influence they can wield in Washington.

The question of **what the role of media should be in a healthy democracy** is an important one. In a healthy democracy, media should provide a forum for discussion of the full range of issues facing the nation and the world. It should be a truly open forum where approximately equal time is given to advocates of various positions. The media should also be a channel for bringing to light injustices in society and irresponsible actions taken by corporations, no matter how large.

In the light of media deregulation and consolidation of media control into a few mega-corporations, the media are in danger of becoming almost the opposite of what they should be in a healthy democracy. Coverage of issues (especially issues related to large corporate interests) tends to be one-sided, in favor of the oligopoly. Issues of great importance (such as the U.S. Telecommunications Act of 1996) are swept under the rug and receive minimal media coverage. In short, the media become a tool for those in power to indoctrinate the public (and the policy-makers) with the propaganda that is in their best interest.

In the light of the above, we are very fortunate to have the Internet, a medium where it is possible to post and discuss dissenting views on key issues without a huge publishing budget. However, even in the case of the Internet, the voices that speak the loudest are those with the most money, and most of the content is aimed at generating revenue rather than telling the truth in an altruistic way.

3. How has the role of the print media changed in present day society? Is it still important to be able to read? Will the print media (Newspapers, Magazines, Books) be entirely absorbed and replaced by the Internet? What effect would this have on how human beings see/experience the world? (In other words, how is a print-mediated world different from an Internet-mediated world?) What would be gained and what would be lost if this were to happen?

Print media are gradually losing their foothold in present day society to electronic media. In some cases (such as eBooks, news sites on the World Wide Web, and email) the new electronic media are not that different from print media. In other cases (movies and television, for example), the new electronic media are radically different from print media. Audio-visual entertainment (such as dance, opera, and theater) has a long history but is far more prevalent today than it was a hundred years ago.

It is still very helpful to be able to read. However, the media situation has improved a lot for people who cannot read due to blindness and other disabling conditions. Besides audiobooks and podcasts, the blind have access to “screen reader” technology that makes it possible to browse the World Wide Web and hear emails read aloud. Assistive technologies for the reading impaired will presumably continue to improve.

As I write this I am struck by the fact that I am sitting in a once-busy room that has lost its original function due to the Internet. I am typing this essay in the reference room of the Somerville West library. I have spent many hours in this room working on homework on my laptop, and have never yet seen someone come into the room to use any of the numerous

volumes of reference material on the shelves. On the other hand, I have shared the room on many occasions with my fellow laptop computer users.

I think it will be a long time before print media completely die out, but their importance will certainly continue to wane in the coming years. The effects of this transition from print to electronic media are numerous. We have already touched on some of the advantages of the transition. On the downside, people will be less motivated to learn to read. Children's imaginations will tend to atrophy as they transition from learning by reading to learning by seeing. Children will not develop as much of an attention span or ability to focus (on something other than a TV screen) for extended periods of time. Another downside is that people are less likely to be motivated to memorize selections from literature, due to their reliance on a smart phone or ultra-portable computer.

The effects of the transition from print media to electronic media will vary a lot from household to household depending on how much time children spend in front of that one-eyed babysitter, the TV (whether watching movies or TV programs or playing video games). Numerous studies have shown the negative effects of excessive TV viewing on children. I do not think the effects of excessive Internet use (texting, emailing, surfing the web) have been studied as thoroughly.

In my opinion, one of the main dangers of the Internet is that it decreases the time people spend interacting directly with one another by bringing all kinds of information and entertainment so close that it is very hard to resist its attraction. The interactivity and multimedia characteristics of the Internet make it more likely than print media to replace face-to-face social contact. I think we can expect to learn more about the effects of the Internet on young people in the near future.

4. Discuss the mass media system of a country or region of the world other than the United States. Consider that the way a country's political system is organized affects the way the media within that country operate – explain what this means in terms of media control and ownership, and in the role different media play in national life. Use specific examples.

I have been to Japan three times and was struck by the differences between mass media in Japan and in America.

At a basic level there are many similarities between mass media in Japan and in America. Both countries are democracies with a mixture of private and public programming. In both countries mass media is primarily operated for profit, funded by advertising, and controlled by a few large corporations. However there are many differences as well.

In Japan, public programming has a larger role than in America. The public programming is less distinguishable from corporate programming due to its larger budget. Also in Japan the lines between government and private industry are not as clear as in America, with the government subsidizing private corporations to a greater extent than in America.

The Japanese political landscape is more diverse than America, with an influential socialist party. There is accordingly a wider range of political message. When I was in Japan I remember vans operated by the socialist party driving through the neighborhood with speakers blasting their message. This struck me as odd in a country where there is otherwise such an emphasis on harmony.

Apart from the occasional blaring socialist van, Japan's cultural emphasis on harmony shines through in its mass media. Billboards, for example, are designed with more attention to harmony with their surroundings. Architecture also reflects this sensibility. One is particularly struck by the emphasis on harmony upon walking into a book store: The book covers and magazine covers are more harmonious both on their own and with one another. One sees rows of

books of the same size and color; one has the feeling that the books and magazines were designed to fit into the book store in their respective places.

Graphic art and typography play a more prominent role in Japanese media than in American media. One sign of this is the prevalence of *manga* and *anime*. On the Japanese subway one is surrounded by *manga*, Japanese graphic/comic magazines. *Anime*, animated television programs and movies, play a much larger role in Japanese media than animated programming in America. An example of an anime director whose work has been popular among both adults and children is Hayao Miyazaki, famous for *My Neighbor Totoro*, *Princess Mononoke*, and *Spirited Away*, among other films. (In America animation is usually aimed at children, but not so in Japan.) Numerous Japanese stores specialize in *anime* and *manga*, and even figurines of the *anime/manga* characters. *Manga* and *anime* both have a kind of cult following in America, especially among teenagers.

Apart from *anime* and *manga*, Japanese mass media such as books and newspapers make more use of illustrations than American mass media. An example of this phenomenon is the users' manuals of Japanese products which are often much more heavily illustrated than American users' manuals.

5. Discuss any ONE of the post-print media (TV, Movies, Radio, Sound Recording, Internet) in terms of its unique characteristics as a medium, its effects upon its audience, and how it has changed people's perceptions and understanding of reality and of social relations.

The Internet stands out among mass media as the one that has made many "average people" not just consumers but producers of media. The cost of setting up a website/blog or posting a video on YouTube is minimal, making it possible for virtually anyone to publish content that has the potential to become mass media by "going viral". Not only can we publish material at marginal cost, we can publish it *globally*.

The Internet allows us to publish and access text, graphics, and video content. It also provides forums for discussion of any topic under the sun. For example, blog posts and news articles on the Internet are often accompanied by forums where users can post their reactions and discuss the issues at hand.

On one hand, the Internet helps to bring together people with similar interests. If I were a chess player, I could use the Internet to play online chess with people around the world. It is easy for me to use the Internet to get in touch with other fans of my favorite music. On the other hand, the Internet tends to replace direct interpersonal communication in many ways. One way the Internet replaces interpersonal communication is by putting us in touch with massive databases of opinions. The Internet can help me find other bands (or movies) I might like based on the tastes of millions of others who use, for example, Netflix. I can use Amazon.com to find a top-rated book on any subject. Another way the Internet replaces meaningful interpersonal communication is by drawing “gamers” into vast online fantasy worlds in a very habit-forming way.

The Internet shares with other mass media a tendency to isolate people from their immediate neighbors by drawing them into another world. What is unique about the Internet is how far its fantasy worlds can go in replacing real life—they can be truly interactive. In extreme cases, Internet worlds take over people’s lives to the extent that they lose their friends, job, and even their health. I recall reading a brief newspaper article about a man who died (partly from dehydration) after about 20 hours of continuous online gaming. With the advent of Internet-capable smart phones, people can be “zoned out” into another world from virtually anywhere.

By providing fantasy worlds and online communities, the Internet can even shape people’s understanding of who they are. A teenage boy, for example, may define himself much

more in terms of his online interests (and online identity) than in terms of his studies, personal life, and non-Internet-related hobbies.

One of the most positive effects of the Internet is that the dominance of money over media is reduced. The Internet gives people a way to publish opinions that would otherwise not be heard because they go against the agenda of the mega-corporations that control other forms of mass media.

Another very positive effect of the Internet is making information accessible to those with disabilities. For example, those who are unable to read can use “screen reader” software to access all of the textual information on the Internet.

In conclusion, the Internet has many positive effects on society but it also can (and often does) have many negative effects due to overuse. People can lose their connection with their immediate surroundings and be diverted from worthwhile activities into online fantasy worlds.