Modern Media Convergence and Media Consolidation

In 1890 there were 13,000 newspapers in the United States. Most were owned by individuals or families who often were also the papers' editors, publishers, reporters and typesetters. Some large cities had over 20 papers. Many had more than 10.

These papers often had radically different editorial positions and appealed to different readers. Though a few were owned by media moguls such as Hearst and Pulitzer, most were not. It is safe to say they represented over 12,000 points of view.

Atticus Finch, the fictional hero of "To Kill a Mockingbird," subscribed to The Mobile Register, The Birmingham News and The Montgomery Advertiser, and presumably The Maycomb Tribune. It is not that he expected any one of them to convey the complete truth. Rather he valued different opinions. In the novel, The Maycomb Tribune was the work of Braxton Bragg Underwood who was "the sole owner, editor and printer."

This American tradition of many voices is in sharp contrast to totalitarian countries where the government controls—and owns—the mass media, including news and entertainment media. The government may control radio, television, movies, and the Internet as well as print, books, newspapers and magazines.

But locally owned media is disappearing in the U.S. and many other countries in the same way the family farm and the locally owned grocery stores are becoming more rare. Locally owned papers, radio stations and television stations have been disappearing from the media landscape. They have been forced out of business or purchased and merged with larger media companies who can be more profitable because of their size. This is **media consolidation**.

Today, one organization may now own many types of media—movie studios, book publishers, news organizations, radio stations, television stations, Internet providers, Internet news sites and magazines, for instance. That is **media convergence**.

For instance in 2013, Clear Channel, which identifies itself as "a Global Media and Entertainment Company" owned over 1,200 radio stations and over one million outdoor advertising displays across 150 **media markets**—geographic areas—in the United States and another 140 stations in Australia and New Zealand. They claimed 239 million listeners each month, 50 million digital assets and 850 websites. They also provided live entertainment events.

Yet in 2013, Clear Channel was far from one of the biggest media companies, which includes companies such as Viacom, CBS, Time Warner, News Corp, Sony and the Walt Disney Company.

Clearly there are advantages to this media consolidation. Clear Channel can invest more time and money in programming that reaches 239 million listeners than can a small station. Advertising to 239 million people is more efficient than buying airtime on several different stations in each of 150 markets. Large media concerns can pay for and promote big-name talent as commentators or hosts for their programs.

There are also disadvantages. The first is the silencing of diverse voices and points of view, one of the traditional strengths of American democracy. Some media watchers think consolidated media leads to a lack of dialogue between competing positions, which may allow more extreme voices to flourish.

Local coverage is also at risk when news, entertainment and programming are created far from the community the media serves. Local emergencies, local arts, local politics, local environmental concerns, local sports and local religious activity may all go unnoticed by media created thousands of miles away. Experiments with funding hyper-local news struggle to find a **business model**, a way to pay for the coverage.

Media consolidation may also mean that the audience becomes less important than the investors. Once, publishers worried financially about two groups, their audience and their advertisers. If publishers maintain their audience's interest at a low enough price, their advertisers would then buy ads because the publisher could sell them the audience's attention.

Some media watchers suggest that stockholders have become the most powerful of all in large media companies. They want a solid return on their investment. The desire for profits may drive decisions that are not in the best interest of the audience. Companies may decrease the number of reporters or avoid controversial topics the audience should know about. Yet the customers—in this case, the audience—cannot easily take their business to another source of information or entertainment. If one company owns the newspaper, the news website, and the television and radio stations in your area, you may not have another choice for news. Likewise, when four or five companies own most of the country's entertainment companies, you may have few choices for movies, television shows, books or entertainment.

Media consolidation may also limit freedom of the press. "Freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one," wrote A. J. Liebling, an American journalist. Liebling may have been too cynical. There are notable examples of the press exposing wrongdoing by its own publishers, owners and advertisers, as well as its own journalists. The ideal is for a "firewall" to exist between the business side of journalism and the news-reporting side. That way, those in charge of making money do not influence what is covered in the press.

Media consolidation and convergence strains those firewalls. Journalists report that their stories that touch on distant parts of their owner's business have been rewritten to be more favorable—or not published at all. So a news organization may not cover a pattern of safety violations at a sports venue if the venue is owned by the same company as the news outlet. A lawsuit against a related company may go unreported. Favorable coverage of a rival company may not be given any airtime or print coverage at all.

Consider the strength of your publication's firewall. What would your publication do if

- your business manager asked you to feature a nearby store in an article "so they will buy an ad;"
- a coach told you she wanted positive coverage for the team or your reporter could not ride the team bus to away games;
- your advisor wanted you to cover the youth program at the church she attends;
- a parent offered your program a new camera or computer equipment while suggesting that her freshman daughter be featured in a story about upcoming elections for cheerleader;
- a member of the school board has been arrested for drunk driving immediately after a high school football game; or
- a local company that provides scholarships for students at your school has been named as the biggest polluter of a nearby lake?

Additionally, media consolidation means there are fewer jobs for journalists, especially young journalists who need to gain experience. At one time journalists worked for small broadcast and print organizations to develop a **stringbook**, a portfolio that shows their ability. Experienced journalists complain less work is available.

Three hundred years of American journalism show the media landscape is never static. New media emerge. New financial models develop to pay for information. Journalists create new ways to practice their profession. The Internet allows anyone with a connection to it to publish. Public Broadcasting and National Public Radio allow their audiences to voluntarily pay for the coverage they value. Cable news provides local coverage. Independent journalists create and sell quality news coverage. Funds and foundations sponsor quality journalism, investigative journalism and journalistic coverage of underreported issues.

Though the media landscape is continually changing, one factor has been present for 3,000 years. Human beings hunger for news.