THE STATE OF AMERICAN MEDIA:
MEDIA CONGLOMERATION IN THE UNITED STATES AND
WHAT CAN BE DONE TO FIX THE MEDIA

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Introduction
Opening Statement

The American media system needs to be reformed. While the media are supposed to be a powerful force in preserving our democracy, certain components have not been as vigilant lately. In the name of capitalism, once separate media companies have merged to form a powerful few. The so-called Big Six -- AOL Time Warner, Disney, General Electric, News Corporation, Columbia Broadcasting Service and Viacom -- control the mainstream media in the United States. Not only do these companies control television stations, but also publishing companies, newspapers, and Internet websites. Additionally, Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation has its hands in every form of media across the globe. Thus, a select few are controlling a large portion of the message to the American people.

As a result of this corporate expansion, the state of journalism has suffered with the emphasis now on the bottom line instead of honest and respectable journalism. The mainstream media have degenerated into partisan reporting on both sides of the political spectrum. Americans are beginning to consider political pundits, like Glenn Beck or journalistic lightweights like Barbara Walters, actual journalists. The healthcare reform debate highlights just how important the media are and how corrupted certain media groups have become. As the reform debate continues, the desire for profits appears to drive the media rather than a desire to report the truth. This can only prove deleterious to the American political system.

For my thesis, I propose to explore the corporate culture of the American media system and how corporations are influencing what is reported. Are advertisers
and business profit margins dictating what is reported on the evening news and in the morning newspapers? To investigate this, I examine the works of leading media reformists such as Ben Bagdikian and Robert McChesney. Additionally, I put this into an historical perspective, discussing earlier attempts to rein in the media. The issue of media reform predates the Federal Communications Commission and Upton Sinclair’s muckraking expose, *The Brass Check*. Biased reporting for political and economic gain is as old as politics itself. Building upon this history, I propose remedies and changes for our current media system.

In addition to exploring the problems with the media system, I examine the make-up of these conglomerates, as there is little current information on this topic. The most recent research on this subject dates back to 2003. The ownership of the media fluctuates frequently; companies are buying or merging with their competition in order to exert stronger control. This variability makes the need for an updated chart all the more important. As part of my thesis, I created an updated flow chart of these multi-nationals’ holdings as none currently appears to exist.

Transparency and honesty in reporting is only possible when conflicts of interest at the corporate level are revealed. Once the American people understand who owns and controls the message in their “local” newspaper, television station, or radio station, then real reform can begin. Corporations hide behind many companies to disguise their influence in the information marketplace. The volatile media market, with companies merging and consolidating, has further allowed the conglomerates to hide what they own. As such, few citizens realize that the information trade is a big
business and it controls the message in the mainstream media. This aspect of my thesis raises awareness of this current problem and works to inspire change.

To summarize, my thesis examines the role that corporations play in influencing the news and how that news then impacts the American political environment. The media are integral in preserving a democracy, and they need to do a better job at this.

**Research question and approach**

Analyzing these issues will be challenging. To simplify things, my two main research questions are: what are the holdings of these six multi-national media conglomerates and what influence do these corporations have on the way the news is reported and made available to the public. The main focus is on the make-up of these conglomerates in order to understand if and how they are affected by money and profits. From there I examine the control that corporations have on how information is reported to the public.

The first chapter examines the history of media in the United States. In order to examine the current state, it is necessary to understand where things started, where things went wrong, and how we got to where we are today. For this aspect of my thesis, I do a literature review that synthesizes the information from readings on the history of American media in order to draw conclusions. This chapter lays the foundation for the rest of my thesis.

The second chapter is an analysis of the current make-up of the big six media conglomerates. In addition to the relevant literature – books, annual reports, newsprint
and magazine articles – I analyze their websites in order to determine what they own. Many of these websites are convoluted and difficult to navigate. This might possibly be an effort on the part of these conglomerates to conceal just how widespread their holdings are. To circumvent this, I examine the annual reports of the media conglomerates that are publicly held companies. An annual report for a publicly held company details the previous year’s business results and outlines the different companies owned by the conglomerates. Because AOL Time Warner, Disney, Viacom, News Corporation and General Electric are all publicly held corporations, they have annual reports available to the public. This chapter includes an updated flow chart on the current holdings of the mass media conglomerates. The chart breaks down each conglomerate’s holdings and show just how consolidated the American media have become.

My final chapter focuses on how the corporations influence what is reported on and published by the media. The research method for this chapter is a critical review of the literature. Books like *The New Media Monopoly* by Ben Bagdikian provide the information to prove how conglomerates manipulate the media. I also make proposals for fixing the current media system in the United States. The proposed reforms draw on the history discussed in the first chapter in order to avoid the same mistakes that have been made in the past. The recommendations focus on improving media at all levels, from government involvement to protecting local news sources and making them independent once again. Generally, one can assume it will take comprehensive reform to fix the problems facing the American media system.
Chapter One: The History
Overview on the History of Media Reform

The idea of media reform is not a new debate; this same battle has continued for well over a century in the United States. In order to understand how the media reached their current state, it is imperative to understand media history and early calls for reform. This chapter will give an historical overview of this topic in the United States; discuss four main perspectives for discussing the history of American media; and identify which standpoint will be used for this paper. This chapter will also discuss the rise and consolidation of media conglomerations from the newspaper chains and Associated Press of the early 20th century to the development of television.

Early 20th Century Newspapers and the Associated Press

At the dawn of the 20th century, the American media system faced many of the same problems that currently plague the system. Mergers, local monopolies, and chain ownership accelerated during this period. In 1900, eight newspaper chains controlled 27 papers, equaling only 10 percent of the total daily circulation in the United States. Just 35 years later, there were 63 chains operating 328 newspapers, representing a 41 percent share of the total daily circulation.
E.W. Scripps, the namesake of the Ohio University School of Journalism, killed 15 newspapers in merger efforts between 1923 and 1934. This trend toward conglomerate formation continued to be the norm throughout the century (Sloan 213).

Newspapers also proved reluctant to print stories that did not portray big business or advertisers in a positive light. When stories about striking miners would reach the newsroom, the publishers would often slander the workers. Papers would claim the workers were violent, while overlooking the brutality of the mine owners. Upton Sinclair, an investigative journalist, would often submit stories only to have them rejected. One of the more notable of these rejections occurred during President Theodore Roosevelt’s investigation into the meat packing industry in Chicago (Sinclair 39-44).

After his investigation into the meat packing industry, Sinclair published *The Jungle* in 1906. President Roosevelt was getting numerous complaints about this industry and was under increasing pressure to launch an investigation. Sinclair traveled to Washington, D.C. to meet with the president. Together, the pair agreed to send two “secret” investigators to Chicago; however word quickly leaked about the inquiry. Owners of the packing facilities discovered that the investigators would be coming to the yards and launched a clean-up operation to hide what they were doing and make conditions look better than they actually were. Sinclair, fearing the integrity of the inspection was being compromised, wrote to the president about the cover up. In his letters, Sinclair included reports from workers about the hasty clean-up efforts that were going on in the yards. In response, Roosevelt offered to send Sinclair along
with the investigators; but when he was unavailable, Sinclair instead handpicked a socialist lecturer and her husband who were his good friends. Company detectives dogged the inspection team, and workers would not talk to the pair for fear of reprisals from the yard owners (Sinclair 39-40).

News of the investigation also leaked to the newspapers. Newspaper owners published vicious attacks on *The Jungle*, claiming that Sinclair knew more about brothels than meat stockyards. The Associated Press sent dispatches to Washington, D.C., as well, that changed the focus of the investigation. These reports instead claimed the president was looking at the validity of Sinclair’s book, taking the spotlight off of the appalling working conditions at the meat packing plants. They reported the president would denounce and annihilate Sinclair as a result of this investigation (Sinclair 40-44).

When the stockyard report was in the president’s hands, Sinclair went to the Associated Press and the New York Times with a myriad of information on the meat packing industry. Even though the investigation was important to millions of Americans, the news organizations wanted nothing to do with Sinclair’s findings. The so-called “Beef Trust” was too important an advertiser for them to anger. Eventually,
the newspapers did publish something on the investigation, but only a few lines (Sinclair 44-47). On the response of the newspapers, Sinclair said:

    My main concern had been for the fate of the workers, and I realized with bitterness that I had been made into a celebrity, not because the public cared anything about the sufferings of these workers, but simply because the public did not want to eat tubercular beef. (Pg 47)

The newspapers were not concerned with the welfare of the American people; they were only concerned with making money and reporting on events that would ensure a profitable bottom line.

    President Roosevelt attempted to pass his new inspection bill without releasing the contents of the report but was unsuccessful. After the “Beef Trust” blocked the bill in Congress, the report was distributed. The trust forced the Agricultural Committees to call hearings where the investigators were put on trial. Sinclair sent a letter to the chairman overseeing the proceedings, but his letter was ignored. The hearings were the trust flexing their muscle, using their senators and representatives to discredit the investigators and their work (Sinclair 45-49).

    While the hearings were going on, The Evening Journal sent a reporter to Sinclair, asking him to write a daily article on the conditions among working girls in New York City. Sinclair agreed to do so, while also agreeing to write similar articles for a competing paper. When the Evening Journal learned of this, they refused to allow Sinclair to write for them. The paper only cared about having an exclusive; the working conditions of women in New York City were of no concern to them (Sinclair 46-47). In response to this, Sinclair wrote:
It is thesis of this book that American newspapers as a whole represent private interests and not public interest. But there will be occasions upon which exception to this rule is made; for in order to be of any use at all, the newspapers must have circulation, and to get circulation, they must pretend to care about the public. There is keen competition among them, and once in a while it will happen that a “scoop” is too valuable to be thrown away. Newspapers are human, and cannot be blamed by their owners if now and then they yield to the temptation to publish the news. So I had found it with “Everybody’s Magazine, and so now I found it when I went with my suit-case full of documents to the office of the “New York Times” (Pg 42).

Again, the interests of big businesses were placed ahead of the interests of the American people.

This story is seminal because it illustrates many of the difficulties the media and journalists face. There were clear problems in the meatpacking industry at the turn of the 20th century. Factories were dirty places and workers were forced to work long, miserable hours in deplorable conditions. While ultimately the meatpacking industry was forced to reform, the solution was based on economics and not egalitarian principles as put forth by Sinclair. It was not because people cared about the working conditions of the poor in Chicago as Upton Sinclair had hoped; these changes were made out of a commercial interest. While it is commendable that the reforms were made, it must be noted that it was economic interests that forced the modifications. As Sinclair noted, many Americans did not want change because they cared about the working conditions; they wanted the reforms because they did not want to get sick from the meat they ate.

It was these same commercial interests that prompted newspapers to finally cover the story. Newspapers did not have any interest in the topic when the attention
was merely on working conditions. There was no money to be made reporting on the miserable plight of meatpackers. However when newspapers realized the story was important to Americans because of its health implications, they chose to follow it because it was now too big to ignore. There was no social responsibility or integrity on the part of the newspapers; their only concern was with a profitable outcome.

Other newspapers, when they did report on the investigation, even tried to change the focus of the inquiry, reporting instead that President Roosevelt was looking into Sinclair and not the meatpackers. It was a subtle difference in wording, but it drastically changed the meaning of the inspection.

The newspapers and Associated Press could stop the report because they had the power to do so. The AP was and is a conglomeration of major newspapers across the country and was then primarily concerned with making money. If a story went against their commercial interests, they could block it from running nationwide. Even more than 100 years ago, there was no such thing as a free and independent media. As Sinclair notes in *The Brass Check*, John Swinton, the editor of the New York Tribune was aware of the state of the media at the turn of the 20th century. Swinton stated:

“There is no such thing in America as an independent press, unless it is in the country towns. You know it and I know it ... The business of the New York journalist is to destroy the truth, to lie outright, to pervert, to vilify, to fawn at the feet of Mammon, and sell his race and his country for his daily bread. You know this and I know it, and what folly is this to be toasting an Independent Press. We are the tools and vassals of rich men behind the scenes. We are the jumping-jacks; they pull the strings and we dance. Our talents, our possibilities and our lives are all the property of other men. We are intellectual prostitutes.” (Pg 400)
Corporations had already ensnared the media by this point. The media were never truly independent in the United States.

**Media During World War II**

The Second World War saw the rise of radio as a news medium, where previously it had been only a source for entertainment. Information was now available on a timelier basis, and Americans would not have to wait until the next day to get their news from a paper. Additionally, newspapers could not match the emotion that was present on the radio. Listeners grew attached to Edward R. Murrow’s live broadcasts during the bombings of London and events such as the funeral of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. By this time, the newspapers were seen as suspect by the working class. While the majority of working-class Americans supported Roosevelt’s New Deal programs, the newspapers were overwhelmingly against them (Baughman 1-8).

It also gave rise to the voluntary propagandists; journalists who unequivocally supported the American war effort. Coverage of the war was sanitized and did not truly reflect its horrors. For example, the faces of the dead soldiers were never photographed. Because the war was largely popular with Americans, the media were
able to pursue such a policy. The media coverage of the war was also completely positive because media companies were afraid to offend large groups of people and lose their subsequent business (Baughman 1-8).

**Post World War II**

Immediately after the war, newspapers still served as the major source of news for Americans, and the Associated Press continued to supply many dailies with the news of the day. Newspapers also remained resistant to change; while consumers wanted a more readable copy, papers refused to alter their format. During this period, the trend towards conglomeration continued. Most large American cities only had one newspaper; between 1948 and 1958, the number of cities with two or more papers fell from 109 to only 70 (Baughman 9-29).

Radio, however, had become the most popular medium. In a survey, more Americans responded that they were satisfied with radio than with religion. Columbia Broadcasting System, a network struggling to match entertainment ratings, began to fill their empty space with news shows.

The Federal Communications Commission played an important role in shaping the future of broadcast media during this period. Private ownership was emphasized over public, state-run media -- the model favored in Europe and the rest of the world. Very few people were critical of this system; and as a result, the FCC created a system that benefited the very rich and powerful media conglomerates. The chain broadcasting that resulted from the FCC’s failure to regulate created a duopoly in radio, with CBS and NBC the two big players (Baughman 19-21).
When television began to rise to prominence, the other media paid little attention at first, thinking it would only serve as an entertainment tool. In 1948, less than half of one percent of American homes had a set; just eight years later in 1956, it was up to 66%. By 1965, more than 90 percent of households had television sets and 22% had more than one. The 1960s also saw an increase in the amount of time and money given to news programming. However, the news was still superficial with most of the time devoted to feature stories. The FCC maintained its libertarian approach to communication and did not strictly regulate the airwaves. As a result, the conglomerates from radio (CBS, NBC, ABC) were able to transition their stranglehold to broadcast television (Baughman 65-98).

Analysis of Modern History

When one studies the post-World War II history of the American media, it becomes clear how we reached the current state of conglomeration. There were never any signs of independent media in the United States. The radio conglomerates were simply transferred to television; big business ruled the airwaves. Had the government made the Federal Communications Commission a strong regulatory body, we might have been able to avoid the current predicament. Unfortunately, the emphasis was placed on capitalistic media and not on unbiased journalism. The Federal Communications Commission adopted a broad libertarian approach to media regulation and as a result, big business was able to infiltrate the American media and mold the system to fit their commercial interests.
This mindset fits with America’s capitalistic beliefs. There has been a fear of socialism in American society that has prohibited any attempt at media reform. During the Cold War, the government created the House Un-American Activities Committee, or HUAC. This group investigated anyone suspected of having communist sympathies. If people refused to name names or cooperate with investigators, the person could be blacklisted and unable to work. How could any attempt at a more socialistic view of the media and media reform exist during such times? Even today leading media reformer Robert McChesney is still branded a Marxist. On the October 7th episode of the Glenn Beck Radio Program, Beck and contributor Seton Motley discussed McChesney and his calls for media reforms. Motley said, “Robert McChesney is an avowed Marxist. So when he founded an organization predicated on tenets regarding Marxism and then they start having large influence and holding great sway in the development of policy for the Obama administration, I believe one should care about what McChesney has to say,” (GlennBeck.com).

The rise of the television network is yet another example of the hands off approach to regulation adopted in this country. The FCC had an opportunity to fairly allocate air space, but failed to intervene. Because of this libertarian approach, big business media was able to conquer another form of communication and ensure greater profits.
Perspectives on the History of American Media

To understand this history, it is crucial to understand the different perspectives on American media. As outlined in *Perspectives on Mass Communication History*, there are four viewpoints: the progressive school, the developmental school, the business school, and cultural school (Sloan 213-227).

Progressive School

The progressive school of journalism looks at journalism in ideological terms. Progressive school historians believe that the purpose of reporting is to crusade for liberal, social and economic causes. Journalists should fight on the side of the masses of common, working people and against the entrenched interests of American business and corporate journalism. Journalism should exist to expose corruption and collusion in business and government and champion the working class ideals of common Americans. Progressive journalists view history as the struggle between ethics and business and the role of big business and what is reported on (Sloan 215-218). This idea is based on social responsibility theory, a viewpoint developed by the Hutchins Commission in 1947. Social responsibility theory argues the media tends towards monopolizing the media and that the public is not concerned with the rights of those unlike themselves. They also assert that commercialization produces selfish politics (Nerone 77).

American journalist and media critic George Seldes (1890-1995) was a leading proponent of the progressive school of thought. He attacked the self-serving, wealthy owners and believed that big business’ control of the press destroyed freedom.
Without independent media there could be no independent journalism. Because of the power big business has over the media, events critical of these large corporate concerns were not reported on. One of the foremost villains to progressive media historians was Frank Munsey (1854-1925), a leading figure in the trend towards newspaper consolidation. Munsey viewed newspapers as nothing more than commodities, rather than vehicles for honest and fair reporting. The bottom line was the most important thing, and Munsey’s papers often had an inoffensive editorial policy in order to maintain a wide-readership. Munsey acquired competing newspapers in order to merge them with stronger ones that he already owned. His papers were not concerned with responsible journalism; instead making a profit was his ultimate goal (Sloan 215-218).

**Developmental School**

The second perspective on American media is the developmental school. While developmental journalists are somewhat concerned with crusading efforts like progressive journalists, they believe journalism is better explained in terms of a libertarian approach to the profession. They are not as anti-big business nor are they as partisan as the progressives, tending toward a less idealistic viewpoint than their progressive counterparts. Developmental journalists adopt a broad libertarian approach to the First Amendment and are critical when other journalists do not do the same (Sloan 219-223).

Libertarian journalists do not believe journalists have a social responsibility; they are only concerned that the government is removed from regulating speech. No
thought of responsibility is given to the speech. This libertarian approach can be seen in the United States Supreme Court Case *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, which will be discussed later in the paper.

**Business School**

The third perspective on media history is the business school, which focuses on business owners and business history. These historians tend to be neo-conservatives and embrace the role of big business in American journalism. Business historians argue that mass-media conglomerate owners are not just concerned with profits. Rather, business historians view them as farsighted entrepreneurs that have made contributions to American mass communication. These corporate owners have also brought new efficient methods of management to media industries, business historians argue (Sloan 222-224).

Business historians embrace the role of big media conglomerates in American media. Media conglomerates have brought new technology and practices to the worlds of journalism and communication, and the business historians praise this. These observers do not place any value in the social responsibility theory; but they do adopt a somewhat libertarian approach to the First Amendment.

**Cultural School**

The final approach to media history is the cultural school, which is concerned mainly with the influence social, political, and economic conditions have on the media. These historians do not criticize the increasing emphasis placed on profits in the American media system like the progressive school, nor do they praise the
business sense of the big media bosses like the economic school historians. Rather they “viewed the changes as a natural result of the social and economic environment,” (Sloan 225). This viewpoint stresses that the media are a result of the collective American culture and its changes.

In 1959, Sidney Kobre laid out the most extensive attempt to explain 20th century media through culture in his work *Modern American Journalism*. “Emphasizing the development of the modern press in terms of press interaction with its environment, Kobre ... believed that gigantic forces including population changes and growth, industrialization, labor organization and a spirit of social reform ... drastically altered the nation’s press,” (Sloan 225-226).

On a smaller scale, cultural historians also consider content characteristics of media a response to cultural changes and changes in the national environment during the 20th century. Cultural historians assume editorial decisions are influenced by cultural perspectives and press content is a response to the interests of readers (Sloan 224-226).

**Analysis of the Perspectives**

While all four of these perspectives do have merit, this paper will adopt the progressive school of thought for viewing media history and current ownership. Journalism should fight to be independent of the corporate influences that have historically and currently influence it. It is imperative for critical reporting that journalists not let corporate interests dictate what and how stories are reported on. In order for journalism to be worthwhile, it must be free to fairly report all sides of an
issue. With its close collaboration with corporations throughout American media history, journalism has lost its independence. Reports frequently favor the interests of big business and not those of the people. Journalism should be the watchdog for the American public and should report fairly. This is the strength of the progressive school of thought. Media ownership is critical to understanding the relationship. Neither the developmental, cultural, nor the business schools stress the importance of understanding who owns the media. The developmental school pays little attention to ownership and instead focuses on journalists, while the business school glorifies corporate journalism. The cultural school prefers instead to focus on the media as a result of cultural changes in the United States. These viewpoints are too narrow in scope and fail to adequately explain many of the problems currently facing the American media system.

The developmental school has a major flaw in its adoption of a libertarian approach to the First Amendment. That philosophy was the underlying opinion in the U.S. Supreme Court ruling on *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* in January 2010 and will most likely produce unintended consequences. The Senate passed the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002, in which corporations and unions were prohibited from using their general treasury funds to create independent

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<th>Summary of the Four Perspectives</th>
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<td>Progressive school: media should be independent watchdog</td>
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<td>Developmental: media should embrace libertarian values</td>
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<td>Business: media exists to make money and should adopt strong business values</td>
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<td>Cultural: media is a result of current culture and attitudes</td>
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expenditures for political advertisements that promoted the election or defeat of a
candidate. In 2008, a conservative nonprofit organization, Citizens United, attempted
to run commercials promoting its film *Hillary: The Movie*, a documentary critical of
then presidential candidate Hillary Clinton. The United States District Court for the
District of Columbia decided later in the year that the film was in violation of the
provision in the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act, deciding the purpose of the film
was only to discredit Clinton; Citizens United had argued that the film was
nonpartisan.

The case was argued in front the United States
Supreme Court in March 2009, and then reargued in
September of the same year. On January 21, 2010, the Court
rendered its verdict in a 5 to 4 decision, holding that the
restrictions on expenditures were void when applied to
spending like that in Citizens United’s film. The decision
overruled *Austin v. Michigan Chamber of Commerce*, which
had ruled that a Michigan Campaign Finance law that
prohibited corporations from using treasury money to run ads
supporting or opposing candidates was constitutional. In the
majority opinion, Justice Anthony Kennedy wrote “if the
First Amendment has any force, it prohibits Congress from
fining or jailing citizens, or associations of citizens, for
simply engaging in political speech ... it would permit

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**Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission**

- Decision in January 2010
- Overruled Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002
- Says corporations have free speech rights equal to individuals
- Will result in unintended consequences
- Multi-national corporations can influence political elections in a much greater way compared to most private individuals
- Puts business issues ahead of issues of the American people
Government to ban political speech simply because the speaker is in an association that has taken on corporate form,” (Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission, 558 U.S. 2010). This decision and its reasoning illustrate a broad libertarian approach to journalism and free speech. Because the practice is not explicitly outlawed in the constitution, the court decided government could not ban corporations and unions from running ads supporting or opposing a political candidate.

In this ruling, the court stated they are protecting free speech. However, this decision does exactly the opposite; it gives private corporations and unions, groups with substantial resources, an inordinate amount of political power. Average citizens do not have the money or media access to express their opinions in such a format; these corporations now will be able to explicitly support whichever political candidate they choose, without any limit to the amount they can spend. This decision also opens the door for multi-national corporations to influence public perceptions ahead of an American election. As a result, a German, Russian, or Chinese corporation could run political ads supporting or opposing an American political candidate.

With this libertarian approach to journalism, the Supreme Court has strengthened the stranglehold corporations have on American media. This decision was the court washing its hands of the situation and declining stricter regulation. Multinational corporations can now advertise freely with this decision; the court has adopted a libertarian viewpoint and refused to intervene. The court did not consider the need for social responsibility by the media or the resultant implications of such a policy. This decision is a disservice to the American people. Under social
responsibility theory, we are taught that media are the fourth estate of government --
journalists are there to keep politicians and the government in check. In a democracy,
the media have a duty to enlighten the population in an unbiased manner so that its
citizens can make informed voting decisions. However, the highest court has given
multinational companies the power to advertise and influence public positions to their
political advantage.

That said, the media should not exist solely to champion the workingman and
working-class ideals. By doing so, one would simply pander to the proletariat, which
would be unfair to business. Business is not inherently evil. To assume so would
create a media system that is the same as today’s, just with the biases reversed.
Corporations would be the villains and the working class would be the only hero.
That is not balanced reporting and not what Americans deserve. Journalists must be
able to report freely and not be concerned with whose interests appear in a positive or
negative light. Correspondents should be focused on reporting the truth and nothing
else. The progressive school of journalism correctly places the emphasis on the desire
for truthful reporting and not on corporate interests.

As it currently stands, media are afraid to offend the interests of large
corporations as these same companies are their owners or pay for the advertisements
that are published and aired. In this environment, journalists are not able to write
stories whose main focus is on the truth. The media need to serve as the fourth estate
of government and as a responsible watchdog not influenced by outside sources.
Failing to do so is a disservice to the citizens of the United States. Voters need access
to unbiased information in order to fully participate in a democracy, and the media currently appears to be incapable of such a task. Instead people are inundated with partisan hackery and what the conglomerates decide we should know. With such information control, Americans are often misinformed when they go into the voting booth. Citizens need to stand up and speak out against the state of the media; Americans need to demand a change.
Chapter Two: The Conglomerates
Overview on the Current State of Media

Where has this history taken us? Currently, a few corporate interests control the media market. We have the big six companies: News Corporation, Disney, AOL/Time Warner, General Electric, Viacom, and CBS Corporation overseeing almost all of the information that we receive. “There’s no sign that this trend is going to slow down. On the contrary, it has accelerated since the landmark Telecommunications Act became law in February 1996,” (Solomon 8). In this chapter, the current ownership of the media will be examined.

The ownership of the media matters for numerous reasons. Media is essential to the survival of democracy; the media are there to serve as a government watchdog. Media owners also influence:

“what news and information communities receive; what voices are heard, or silenced; whether important issues get covered accurately, or covered at all; who gets hired to report and produce the news; what music and which artists get airplay; and how women and people of color are portrayed in the media,” (FreePress.net). These few white, wealthy men essentially control all of the information that is available to the citizens of the United States.

I will show the current state of consolidation by outlining all of the different enterprises that the companies own, categorizing them by television, satellite and film, print, and non-media holdings. From there, I will describe just what that ownership means for Americans.
**Analysis of the Ownership of the Media**

**General Electric**

What does this ownership mean? As the list shows, these few corporations control the majority of our media. Companies that control the news also control vast business empires. General Electric owns NBC and reaches 99% of all American households. General Electric is also one of the top military contractors. Between December of 2007 and October of 2008, General Electric, through its Transportation Aircraft Engine division, has been awarded around 90 military contracts worth more than eight billion dollars (Military Industrial Complex). How can a news company report honestly on the United States military when their parent company is one of the military’s top suppliers? There is a clear conflict of interest here.

This is not the only conflict of interest surrounding General Electric. The company runs a commercial finance sector, including GE Insurance Solutions and Transportation Financial Services Group, along with GE Consumer Finance. On the broadcast side, General Electric operates CNBC, one of the top business and financial channels. How will CNBC be able to report critically on financial issues when its parent company has a vested interest in such matters? These are clarifications that need to be stated before the start of any financial story.
General Electric also has a large stake in industrial and infrastructure industries. The company runs sectors in plastics, lighting, household appliances, aircraft engines, petroleum, water, and process technologies. If there is a recall on a General Electric product, it is counterproductive for NBC to report on the issue; its parent company has a serious financial stake in how the story is reported.

News Corporation

When Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation acquired a controlling share of the largest satellite broadcaster in the United States for the small price of 6.6 billion dollars, it gave Murdoch an addition 9 billion dollars in annual income as well as another platform for his Fox programs to reach millions more homes. Murdoch would now have the ability to bully and intimidate other large systems and cable providers like Time Warner (Bagdikian 36-37). “Two impulses seem to drive Murdoch’s business life – the accumulation of as much media power as possible and the use of that power to promote his deep-seated conservative politics,” (Bagdikian 38). Murdoch flirted with Marxism while attending Oxford before becoming the arch-conservative he is today; similar to how a young William Randolph Hearst was a socialist before becoming the adult reactionary he was in later life (Bagdikian 38-39).

Murdoch has used and continues to use his media empire to promote conservative political candidates and ideas. In the 1980s, after purchasing two British
national newspapers with circulations in the millions, Murdoch wanted more. His purchase of the Sunday and daily *Times* newspapers was forbidden by England’s monopoly laws. However, Murdoch used his media empire to help get conservative candidate Margaret Thatcher elected as prime minister. Thatcher then permitted Murdoch to break the Minority Commission rules, allowing Murdoch to purchase both *Times* papers.

This is not the only time Murdoch has had the rules bent to allow his media empire to expand. During the 1980s, Murdoch circumvented the law preventing foreign entities from owning more than 24.9 percent of an American broadcast station (television or radio). Murdoch became an American citizen but has yet to comply with one aspect of the law – that the company be based in the United States. Murdoch receives special tax advantages by keeping his company headquartered in Australia. Like in England, Murdoch used his newfound media empire to get the first and only waiver of the American broadcast law (Bagdikian 38-40).

Murdoch’s open right-wing politics continue to be promoted on air. During the debate over healthcare reform in the United States, Fox News, Murdoch’s American cable news channel, regularly attacked the Democrats’ push for change. During his March 24th, 2010 show, Fox News host Sean Hannity wondered if Democrats were making up death...
threats after passing the healthcare bill. Hannity said Democrats “are trying to make a big deal over the weekend and this is denied by a lot of people. I have not seen the videotape that confirms this yet... I want to see it, of racial slurs, anti-gay slurs being made at the Tea Party movement,” (Hannity, 3/24/10). The Fox Nation homepage questioned, “are threats really elevated or are Dems playing politics,” (foxnation.com). This version of the story was refuted by various other media sources. Democratic Representative Emanuel Cleaver, a black representative from Missouri said “it was a chorus ... I feel sorry for those people are doing this nasty stuff,” (McClatchy). Openly gay Democratic Representative Barney Frank told the Boston Globe that a crowd called him a “homo,” (McClatchy).

Fox has gone on to establish itself as the fourth television network in the United States, along side of ABC, NBC, and CBS. Fox has more than 20 wholly owned and affiliated stations throughout the country. The network is also a major player in broadcast sports, with 20 different sports stations.

**Disney**

Missouri born Walt Disney is responsible for one of the other large media firms in the United States. Since his death in 1966, his company has grown in ways that he probably could never have imagined. Much of that growth was due to the former CEO Michael Eisner. Eisner made his name at Paramount Pictures, where he cut costs down to 8.5 million dollars per picture at a time when the industry average was 30 percent higher (Bagdikian 33-34).
Eisner moved to Disney in 1984 and ten years later bought the newspaper-broadcast chain ABC/Cap Cities. It later became the Walt Disney Corporation and a global media empire (Bagdikian 34). The company currently owns nine separate film companies through Walt Disney Pictures, including Pixar, Touchstone Pictures, Hollywood Pictures, and Miramax Films. On top of that, the company owns cable channels such as Disney, ESPN, A&E, and the History Channel. Disney Corporation maintains cartel-like relationships with many of the media companies that should be Disney’s competitors; some of its joint ventures are with General Electric, owners of NBC (Bagdikian 36).

**Time Warner**

On January 10, 2000, one of the largest media mergers in American history took place; a marriage so wealthy it joined a company worth 163 billion dollars with one worth 120 billion dollars. This was the marriage of Time Warner and America Online. America Online had already merged with its competitors Netscape and CompuServe before joining with Time Warner. Time Warner had already built a large magazine family that included *Life, Fortune, Sports Illustrated,* and *People.* “Time, Inc later merged with Warner Brothers, which itself had gathered other firms in music, movies, television, and newer media,” (Bagdikian 30).

At the time, this merger was market perfection, it would maximize the most
important thing in business at the time – synergy. “Synergy, borrowed from physiology, describes how the combination of two separate entities produces a power greater than the simple addition of the two,” (Bagdikan 31). Time Warner, at the time, owned numerous media products, and AOL had the perfect medium to instantly send this to the computers of consumers, the Internet (Bagdikan 30-31).

The honeymoon did not last long, however. The merger brought massive amounts of debt on the two corporations, debt that at the time was considered unimportant. Much like the run-up to the economic recession in 2009, banks in 2000 lent millions without looking closely at the companies. “By 2003, Time Warner had a metaphoric yard sale on its front lawn,” (Bagdikan 32). The company sold off some of the book divisions and removed company leaders. However, the company still owns a massive media empire. Time Warner cable owns the entire Warner Brothers empire, including Warner Brothers Television Production, WB Animation, WB Consumer Products, and WB International Cinemas. Time Warner owns one of the largest cable companies in the United States, offering On Demand Services, Digital Video Recorders, High Speed Internet, and Digital Phone.

Time Warner also owns one of the largest television empires in the country. Turner Broadcasting System (TBS) is one of the companies many subsidiaries. Through this ownership, Time Warner is the owner of Cable News Network (CNN), a cable broadcast station that reaches 82 percent of American households and millions more around the world. Time Warner also owns the main TBS station, Turner
Network Television (TNT), Cartoon Network, Turner Classic Movies, Home Box Office (HBO), and Cinemax.

Even though the company attempted to sell off its publishing wing, Time Warner still puts out more than 145 magazines worldwide through Time Inc. The company profits off of magazines like Time, People, Sports Illustrated, Fortune, Entertainment Weekly, and InStyle. Online, Time Warner puts out CNN.com, NASCAR.com, Time.com and PGA.com. Through its ownership of America Online, the company has the popular AOL Instant Manager (AIM) web chat service, Mapquest, Moviefone, CompuServe, and Netscape. Outside of the media, Time Warner is the owner of the Atlanta Braves Major League Baseball franchise.

**Viacom and CBS**

Viacom emerged as a formidable force in the American media system during World War II. The company created a niche for itself with Edward R. Murrow’s radio broadcasts that had listeners tuning in nightly. Because of those shows, Columbia Broadcasting System became the gold standard for journalistic integrity. It was a far cry from the sad state that CBS radio was in when Sam Paley bought out his debt-ridden friend, the previous owner of CBS. Paley said that he did it as a favor and that he purchased the stations for his son William. At the time, CBS was on the verge of bankruptcy and had no
affiliates, unlike NBC. However, those World War II broadcasts with Murrow saved the company and made them the leaders in journalism for the next fifty years. “When something big happened in the world, sophisticated Americans turned to CBS because when they suddenly heard ‘We interrupt this program’ they knew that, if it was truly important, CBS would put it on air at once and do it with trusted reporters,” (Bagdikian 45).

Viacom would purchase CBS in 1999 for the princely sum of 50 billion dollars. However in 2005, the two split into a slow-growing company, called CBS Corporation, and a fast-growing company that kept the Viacom name. The purpose of the split was to facilitate Viacom’s growth into a more streamlined company better able to keep up in the new digital-media age. These companies still control large portions of the American media, however. Viacom owns the massive MTV Network empire, while CBS maintains control over both the CBS radio and television networks (Old and new media part ways).

**Media Failings and the War in Iraq**

Conflicts of interest inside the American media system were apparent in its coverage of the War in Iraq. General Electric is one of the top military suppliers in the United States and their broadcast division reaches almost every American household. Rupert Murdoch and News Corporation bent the rules to create media empires in both the United States and the United Kingdom. Such contrary business concerns can lead to failings by the American media. A breakdown like that occurred during the days leading up to the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2002.
The George W. Bush administration was facing an increasing number of problems as the 2002-midterm elections approached. Republican Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott was forced to resign after he gave a speech filled with racist statements and revelations that he was a member of a Mississippi based racist group. Shortly before entering office in 2000, President Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney sold personal stocks in “companies they controlled under circumstances similar enough to raise eyebrows,” (Bagdikian 75). If the Democrats gained control in the Senate, there would be investigations into Republican behavior that would embarrass both the White House and the Congress. Those investigations would never take place.

After Labor Day 2002, President Bush announced that the United States would be going to war with Iraq. The reason was Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein was supposedly stockpiling weapons of mass destruction that “created an imminent threat to the United States,” (Bagdikian 76). Democratic leaders that questioned the president’s justification for the invasion were accused of not caring about the safety of the country. In his 2003 State of the Union address, President Bush announced that Iraq had “30,000 munitions capable of delivering chemical agents, 500 tons of chemical weapons, 25,000 liters of anthrax, and 38,000 liters of botulism toxin,” (Bagdikian 76).

After the United States invaded, it became evident that Iraq had no such weapons nor was there evidence that it was close to obtaining such armament. How was the government able to disseminate such false information? The media was
beholden to American military contracts and did not report critically on the Bush administration’s assertions. By the time the American government claimed mission accomplished, several thousand Iraqi civilians were dead and American military casualties were mounting daily. A year later, still no weapons of mass destruction had been found, no al Qaeda cells were discovered (Bagdikian 77-79). “The Charge that Hussein was importing uranium had been known to be based on a forged document exposed months earlier by the CIA and a former U.S. ambassador as a forgery,” (Bagdikian 79).

What was the media’s role in all of this? The American media did not do the investigative reporting that is expected of them as the fourth pillar of government. As outlined by the progressive school of journalism, our media is supposed to act as a government watchdog and protect the interests of democracy. In a democracy a well-informed public is crucial. The government was stonewalling journalists; however that should not stop a reporter from going after a story. Government interference did not stop Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward from investigating the Watergate Scandal. Instead, our media decided to accept the government’s story and ran with it.

A study conducted in 2003 by the University of Maryland’s Program on International Policy showed many Americans had “significant misperceptions” about the Iraq War and the prevalence of misperceptions differed significantly according to the individual’s main source of news (Steuter and Wills 157). War propaganda became presented to the American people as facts. Amy Goodman, host of the American radio and television program Democracy Now noted that American
journalism was at an all-time low in the run up to the war. American media gave minimal coverage to the number of Iraqis and Afghans “killed by invading forces, insurgent attacks, starvation, displacement, or unexploded ordnance,” while the American and NATO soldiers killed were counted and named (Steuter and Wills 160). The American military also prohibited photographs of the coffins of dead American soldiers, starting with the first invasion of Iraq in 1991, citing the privacy of grieving families; that decision was upheld by the U.S. Court of Appeals in 1996. These suppressions impact both the public’s trust in the military and the media. A 2005 Gallup poll showed only 54 percent of Americans thought the military keeps them properly informed; only 61 percent think the media keep them properly informed (Steuter and Wills 161-163).

Unfortunately, this type of failing can be expected in the conglomerated state of the American media. The media conglomerates place a higher priority on making money than on critical reporting. In some cases, the media have even let the government dictate how it reports on a story. “In the aftermath of 9/11, then-national security adviser Condoleeza Rice offered network executives from several prominent news networks, including CNN and Fox News, guiding advice concerning coverage of bin Laden’s and Al’ Qaeda’s taped statements,” (Steuter and Wills 169). Disney blocked its Miramax division from distributing Michael Moore’s film Fahrenheit 9/11 because the film was critical of the Bush administration; Disney was afraid of losing the tax breaks it received in Florida from Governor Jeb Bush, the president’s brother.

The following story highlights that conflict between profits and the truth.
The Myth of Jessica Lynch

The Jessica Lynch story is a microcosm for how the American media handled the War in Iraq. American journalists were called for a late-night press conference for a breaking story; many thought it would be that Hussein had been captured. Instead they were told the story of U.S. Army Private Jessica Lynch. Lynch, the media were told, was part of a convoy that had been ambushed by Iraqi military. They were told she emptied her clip fighting off the enemy and was stabbed and suffered bullet wounds. Lynch was then captured by the Iraqis and tortured while strapped to a hospital bed. Later that night, American soldiers attacked the hospital and she was rescued. The military then said that Lynch could not be interviewed because she was suffering from memory loss and could not remember what happened. At least, that was the story that the American media were told. They accepted this version of the story (Bagdikian 77-81).

However, this story was not true. Yes, Lynch was part of a convoy that got lost and was ambushed; and yes, American soldiers did charge into the hospital to retrieve Lynch. Lynch, however, had suffered no bullet or stab wounds and her Iraqi captors had not tortured her. Her captors were really doctors that were treating her broken bones and looking for an American military unit so they could return Lynch. There was no torture or fighting off her attackers to the last bullet. The military knew that the story they were telling was incorrect (Bagdikian 78-79). “After the false story had gone through a complete news cycle as a sadistic horror, the army eventually
corrected its false story. But only after the known falsity was permitted to spread throughout the world.” (Bagdikian 79).

**How Our Media Failed Us**

The Jessica Lynch story is a prototypical example of how our media system regularly fails us. The majority of the mainstream media did not do any critical reporting or investigating before circulating this story. The media had decided that they were in support of the War in Iraq and had a feel-good story about a heroic, white, female soldier. If she would have been African-American or Hispanic, would the same amount of attention been given to the story? How could our media have failed us so badly?

Here we can see just how conglomerated the media are. The media controlled all of the people’s access to information; there were few other media outlets American citizens could turn to for the true story about what really happened. The alternatives to the conventional media were not powerful and lacked mainstream credibility. These six companies controlled the access and version of the story that was told and shaped perspectives about what happened that night in Iraq. The media told the American citizens a story that sounded good but lacked any critical reporting. The story of a soldier fighting off her attackers and showing bravery in the face of danger sounds better than the story of a soldier rescued by Iraqi doctors; it fit

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**Jessica Lynch Summary**

- Part of an ambushed convoy in Iraqi
- Military said she fought off attackers before being captured
- While in captivity, the military said she was tortured
- She was really rescued by Iraqi doctors and treated for her injuries
- Military would later say Lynch had no memory of the incident, which her father refuted
the dialog that Iraqis were dangerous and needed to be fought. Any concerns about
the version of the story that the military was telling the public were quickly dismissed
or ignored by both the media and the government. As in the run up to the invasion of
Iraq, the military and the government lied to the American people. The conglomerated
media did no critical reporting of either story; the media took the government’s story
at face value. The military said that Private Lynch had no memory of the incident and
was not available to be interviewed; Lynch’s father would later refute those claims.

Why did the media not press harder to get the story correct? They knew they
were the only source of any “credible” information concerning the war in Iraq.
However, it was in their best interests to simply accept the report that both the military
and the government were pushing. If they deviated from the government’s script or
asked too many questions, they could be labeled as traitors or supporting terrorism.
As a result, the media trusted what the government told them and publicized the
account; the Jessica Lynch narrative was a great, uplifting story of an American
soldier fighting heroically and surviving being tortured by her captors. The media
loved the tale too much to critically examine it; and the American public loved the
story just as much and did not question it.

**Conclusion**

The regrettable thing is that the military knew that it could tell such a
falsehood without any repercussions from the American media or people. They
understood that once the story circulated, there would be no way to stop the fictitious
account. How many Americans know what really happened to Private Lynch? How
many still believe that she was tortured by the very people that were helping her? I know that when I re-read the narrative about Lynch, my first thoughts were about her fighting off Iraqis, not that that the events never happened.

In 2004, almost two years after the Iraqi invasion, the *New York Times* admitted they had succumbed to the government’s propaganda and apologized. One of the most famous newspapers in the United States and the world expressed regret over the coverage it had provided to its readers in the months preceding the war. In its apology, the Times wrote, “we have found a number of instances of coverage that was not as rigorous as it should have been. In some cases, information that was controversial then, and seems questionable now, was insufficiently qualified or allowed to stand unchallenged,” (*New York Times*, May 26, 2004). An apology is hardly recompense for the damage done. While the Times was not the only news outlet to publish the false information, they were the only one to directly apologize. Their admission of guilt does not make up for their insufficient fact checking, required of a credible news source, nor does it change the fact that many Americans used the Times reporting in supporting the United States’ invasion of Iraq. Even though the *New York Times* is not part of these mass media conglomerates, this apology is a formal recognition of the failings of the American media.

This is not the only problem with our media. The current system has allowed the political right to reemerge as the arbiter of everything American or patriotic. Our media are conservative, so it is only natural that they promote such causes. We have given power to the media that anything that does not openly embrace conservative
values is called liberal. This can be seen with programs like *Democracy Now*, a show that takes a more critical look at politics, both domestic and foreign, than many other news programs. Being critical does not mean being liberal. How has analytical reporting become associated with being liberal and, therefore, a bad thing? This has happened through the subtle redefinition of “mainstream” in the American media. To make the situation better we need to fix our media.
Chapter Three: Solutions
Introduction

The history has been analyzed; the problem has been presented. Now it is time to move forward and fix the state of the media in the United States. It will not be an easy task to reform the media and to remove the conglomerates – they have the power and have the vast resources to lead a fight against media reform. Fighting change is in their best interest; if and when there is a large-scale media overhaul, they will not be able to exploit the information for massive profits like they do now. The task will be daunting, but it is not impossible.

In this final chapter I will discuss what needs to be done to repair the American media system. I will examine and discuss the ways and means through which American citizens can work to fix our media and put the people back in charge. By reforming the media, we will be able to improve American politics as well. We must fight the redefinition of the term mainstream by the right-wing media giants. We must make media reform a priority for our politicians. Through elected officials, we must make the Federal Communications Commission a strong regulatory board that will fight against the interests of big business in the media. The media are here to serve the people and to help democracy; it is time that we ensure that they do those things.

The Media and the Rise of the Right – Redefining the Mainstream

It is no accident that right-wing politics are on the ascendant in the United States, given the media’s bias and espousal of conservative ideals. As discussed in the previous two chapters, they have failed us on numerous occasions throughout the past century; and one conglomerate, Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation, regularly
attacks the other media sources as being liberal. “Despite increasing conservatism among the mainstream media ... conservative critics naturally continued the attack on networks’ perceived politics,” (McPherson 182-183). Before the War in Iraq in 2003, some media observers noted that CNN, one of the stations the right regularly accuses of being liberal, had become even more conservative than Murdoch’s Fox News. Conservative news programs fill the airwaves: Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck, Sean Hannity, Bill O’Reilly, and many others. News programs regularly invite right-wing pundits like Ann Coulter onto their shows. In 2002, CNN made Christian Coalition founder Pat Robertson its lead commentator on a 2002 Middle East policy speech; that same year NBC made Rush Limbaugh an election commentator. NBC is one of the main networks conservative commentators accuse of having strong liberal biases. What liberal commentators are always making their rounds of the talk shows? The only noteworthy liberal media shows both air on MSNBC; Countdown with Keith Olberman and the Rachel Maddow Show. ABC made reporter John Stossel as the co-anchor of the newsmagazine 20/20 in 2001; Stossel kept this position after publishing his book Give Me a Break: How I Exposed Hucksters, Cheats, Scam Artists and Became the Scourge of the Liberal Media. The host of one of ABC’s prominent newsmagazine advertised the fact that he is a Republican and took pleasure in being the “scourge” of the liberals (McPherson 183-188).

This is all part of the redefining of mainstream by the conservative media conglomerates. They have almost unprecedented control over the access average Americans have to information. When conservative critics complained that the PBS
news program *Now* was too liberal, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting hired an outside consulting firm to monitor the show for bias. No outside firm has been hired to monitor shows for conservative bias (McPherson 189). Often conservatives try to point that there are liberal equivalents to the conservative pundits. After a five-part, partially fictionalized docudrama called *The Path to 9/11* aired on ABC in 2006, the *New York Times* and liberals criticized the revisionist nature of the piece. Conservatives responded by pointing out liberal filmmakers, such as Michael Moore, regularly distort the truth when it is beneficial to their causes. While this is true, it fails to mention one fact: Moore and other liberal filmmakers do not have the backing of major television networks when they put out their pieces. “The mainstream press needed little encouragement to be dragged to the right, ... focused more on profits than on public service, the news media catered to viewers’ tastes for the sensational and the trivial,” (McPherson 191).

We can see the trivialization of our media in the rise of political punditry. Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck rake in tens of millions of dollars from their shows; the only reason they can make that much money is because they pander to the tastes of a population that only wants to hear those beliefs. Yes, they do have a right to promote their political views; this is not to say that they should be banned from broadcasting. However, much of what they do is harmful for democracy and the political health of the United States. These shows are not debate shows; these shows do not offer in-depth, thought-out political discussion and analysis. Instead, these shows exist to invoke fear in the American citizenry and to proselytize for
conservative viewpoints. Their purpose is to create controversy where there is none. Reporting that strays from this ultraconservative spin is branded liberal. These shows promote the myth of the liberal media and this needs to be changed.

**Starting the Fight**

Reforming the media will be an arduous process. It will take years and the hard work of the American people. The first step in fixing the American media is to engage our politicians in the struggle. It was not until the 1960s that the environment was a political issue; global climate change has made the matter even more important. Currently, it seems as if every candidate running for office has a position on green energy, global climate change, and the environment. The same can happen with media reform. If enough people write to their representatives and senators, this will become a pertinent concern.

Robert McChesney and Josh Silver founded Free Press, a media advocacy group in 2002. The group is a “national, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization working to reform the media,” (FreePress.net). They work to reform the media “through education, organizing, and advocacy,” (FreePress.net). Average Americans started the process of making this an issue in June 2003 after the Federal Communications Commission voted 3-2 to further relax ownership standards. More than three million citizens sent emails and letters, made telephone calls, or signed petitions showing that
this relaxation and deregulation was unacceptable. These citizens put enough pressure on the Republican-controlled Congress that some of the rule changes were overthrown that same year. A year later in June 2004, Federal Courts threw out all of the FCC rule changes. As McChesney writes, there are six lessons for the American public to learn about the media reform fight from the success of 2003:

1. People actually cared enough about media issues to organize around them
2. People were quite capable of sophisticated and thoughtful positions on media issues
3. Media reform could be a gateway issue to draw people into public life and citizen activism
4. The Internet and digital technologies dramatically changed the nature of political organizing and made possible work that would have been impossibly expensive in years past
5. Media reform was both a nonpartisan movement and a progressive movement
6. Conservatism as it had evolved in American politics was incapable of addressing the concerns of the media reform movement, and was increasingly incapable of providing a coherent governing philosophy (McChesney 158).

The media are going to discredit all attempts to reform them. Again, it is in their best interest to stop the movement. Already, Glenn Beck and his Fox News friends have
labeled McChesney a radical socialist and claimed that he hates America. There is nothing un-American about wanting better media; and if anything, advocating for a responsible media is inherently patriotic. The desire for media reform will strengthen democracy as it provides the citizenry with better information and a true voice. This experience shows that people want better media and that Americans will actively participate in this movement if they are knowledgeable about the situation. No longer can the conglomerates say that they are providing people with what they want. What the people want is an accountable and responsible media.

**Strengthening the FCC**

The Federal Communications Commission (The FCC) was established in 1934 through that year’s Communications Act. Its purpose is to regulate the non-federal government use of radio and television broadcasting. The FCC is given the mandate of the people to ensure that the public interest is protected through the limited allocation of airwaves. Had this organization actually exercised its power, we would not be in the situation we find ourselves now.

The FCC can start by reforming its libertarian approach to media. For some industries, this method works; however the media is not one of those industries. By setting tougher broadcast standards and then enforcing them, the FCC can help turn-
around the media and stop the mergers of these corporations. The commission can curtail the dominance of the conservative press and demand independent reporting. We, the citizens of the United States, can demand that the FCC does this. The people stopped the FCC in 2003; it is time that we stand up again (McChesney 156-158).

**Dismantling The Conglomerates**

This will be one of the toughest challenges in the process. For-profit media groups can be allowed to exist; however, they cannot operate at their current level in a democratic society. The mid-1940s to the early 1970s was a golden age for antitrust action by the government until the Reagan-Bush era targeted antitrust action as a way of creating smaller government. “As a result, one expert observed in 1998 that antitrust is sick and has been in retreat for over two decades,” (McChesney 311, 1999).

The concentrated wealth of the conglomerates is a danger to independent politics in the United States. In his book *Rich Media, Poor Democracy*, Robert McChesney proposes:

> What is needed, then, is a new media antitrust statute, similar in tone to the seminal Clayton and Sherman Acts, that lays out the general values to be enforced by the Justice Department and the Federal Trade Commission. It would put an emphasis on valuing the importance of ideological diversity and noncommercial editorial content. The objective should be to break up such media conglomerates as Time Warner, News Corporation, and Disney, so that their book publishing, magazine publishing, TV show production, move production, TV stations, TV networks, amusement parks, retail store chains ... and so on all become independent firms. With reduced barriers to entry in these specific markets, new firms could join in,” (312).

This system is not proposing socializing the media or the news information industry. This new system would be more capitalistic because it would allow more competition
between the firms and would allow for new companies to enter the marketplace. Viewers would be allowed to have real choice from the media, not choice between six giant conglomerates. However, this can only happen with a strong FCC and the will of the people driving the movement forward.

**Real Public Media**

Alongside the smaller, for-profit media organizations, there must also be a large-scale non-commercial, non-profit public media system, much like the German model. “Germany has a dual system of both public and commercial broadcasting. In public broadcasting the Länder (states) have a strong role... the public service broadcasters are a creation of the Länder,” (Media Landscape). This is an arrangement we can imitate here in the United States. In Germany, the “traditional public service broadcaster is set up as an independent and non-commercial organization, financed primarily by license fees,” (Media Landscapes). The FCC could levy a higher tax on the licenses awarded to the commercial stations and use that money to fund separate, non-commercial public media.

Such a system could be put in place here in the United States. While public broadcasting does exist, it is not as strong as it could be. After the conglomerates are broken down into separate corporations, those in the media industry will be taxed. Those tax revenues would fund the creation of a strong, independent public media system. The system would no longer be dependent on the donations of listeners; the system would be funded by private industry. This organization would be able to produce educational programming, news programming, and entertainment
programming while not relying on commercials to balance the books. The station would be removed from commercial interests and would be able to report independently. The station would be similar to the British Broadcasting Company (the BBC) in its make up and programming.
**Introduction**

It is imperative for the health and the survival of American democracy that our media are reformed. Media owners control what news is covered and how it is covered; what information communities receive; what music is played on the radio and what programs are seen on television (FreePress.net). The corporate expansion into journalism has taken the priority away from honest journalism and placed it on the bottom line. A select few corporations are now controlling a large portion of the news message American people receive. Many Americans consider television personalities and political pundits to be actual journalists.

**How We Got Here**

The media reform debate is not a new debate; it is a discussion that has been going on for well over a century in the United States. At the dawn of the last century, the main medium for the news, newspapers, were nearly as conglomerated as broadcast is now. By 1935, 63 newspaper chains operated 328 newspapers, totaling a 41 percent share of the total daily American circulation. This trend toward conglomeration would continue (Sloan 213).

Newspapers were loath to print stories that were critical of big business or their advertisers. Publishers would often slander striking mine workers, claiming the workers were violent; the papers would conveniently overlook the violence mine owners committed against the workers. Newspapers attacked American author and
investigative journalist Upton Sinclair after his book *The Jungle* was published in 1906.

When broadcast emerged as a viable alternative to newspapers in the mid-20th century, the Federal Communications allowed a select few corporations to establish a stranglehold over the airwaves.

**Where We Stand Today**

Currently, a few corporate interests control the media market. These big six companies, News Corporation, General Electric, Disney, Time Warner, Viacom, and CBS, control almost all of the information that we receive. These companies direct multiple interests in the broadcast market, including television and radio stations, television and film production companies, publishing houses, as well as industrial and financial concerns. These few wealthy, white men oversee what information American citizens have access to.

This conglomeration has resulted in media failings, including the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq in 2002 and the myth of Jessica Lynch.

**Moving Forward**

It will be a daunting task to fix the American media system. The corporate interests have firmly entrenched themselves in American society and American political culture. The first step in this fight is to stop the redefinition of what is mainstream by the right-wing media corporations. Next, Americans will have to rally and make media reform an important issue with the American government. It was not until the 1960s that the environment became a political topic; now almost every
candidate has a position on environmental issues. Galvanizing the American citizenry will also allow the Federal Communications Commission to have greater power in enforcing and strengthening media regulations.

The biggest step in reforming the media will be breaking up these large conglomerates. Disassembling them will remove many of the conflict of interests currently present in the American media. While critics of media reform will argue that this is socialism, this will only make the media industry more capitalistic. By having more, smaller media companies, the barriers of entry will be lowered, allowing for more people to become involved in the media industry. Hand-in-hand with these smaller, private media companies, there will be a strong public media. An American public media system would be funded from private corporate license fees.

**Expanding the Research**

There is still more than can be researched. One of the growing media conglomerates is Bertelsmann, a German based company. This company controls one of the largest media empires in Europe, along with many of the book publishing houses in the United States. It would be beneficial to document the make-up of this new media conglomerate.

The Internet is also a growing problem for media reformers with the topic of net neutrality becoming increasingly important. According to FreePress.net, net neutrality is about keeping the Internet “free, open, and neutral; it is vital to ensuring that everyone can connect and share content freely, that we can access the information, visit the websites and say what we want online, free from discrimination or
interference.” Net neutrality is vital in ensuring that cable companies do not make the Internet their own personal toll road (FreePress.net). By keeping the Internet affordable and neutral, we can help close the digital divide.

Reflections

This has been a long journey writing this thesis. Throughout the research process, I have been able to learn more about why media reform is so critical and necessary to preserving democracy in the United States. I am more familiar with the conglomerates and their holdings, which will now allow me to better decipher truth and spin in what I hear, see and read. On a personal side, I learned more about the way I work. I found I was more effective when I devoted large amounts of time periodically rather than smaller work sessions on a daily basis. When I would try to force myself to work on my thesis every day, my work would suffer; however when I let it come naturally, I could write pages in the span of an hour.

There were no real academic obstacles that I had to fight while working on this project; the toughest part was formatting my charts and condensing the holdings of the conglomerates all into a page per company. Were I to re-do my thesis, I do not think I would do anything drastically different. I would change the order in which I had done my research and condensed my research. Had my research been focused from the start, the project would have been easier to complete. Originally I had tried to do too much in too short of time.

Closing Statement
Our media are the source of all of our information. As part of a democratic society, we rely on media to provide us with knowledge to make an educated decision when we enter the voting booth. Reforming our media will serve to create a stronger, democratic American society. Media reform is not about partisanship; this is a bipartisan issue. What is important is ensuring that our media provide us with an unbiased, critical account of what is happening in the world on any given day.
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