

Media Corpse

Solidarity Federation

Winter 1998

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Media ownership in Britain today is concentrated into the hands of a few moguls. The implications of this have given rise to a debate around the respective merits of complete de-regulation within the industry, or (a return to) increased state intervention. Those who argue for regulation to protect public service broadcasting (in the shape of the BBC), and for stricter limits on cross-media ownership, see the current trends as a fundamental threat to good old British democracy and free speech. On the other hand, the media corporations and rampant free marketeers want a free hand to expand and compete internationally for a better position in the hyped-up, multi-media future.

Besides the BBC, the state control brigade includes a range of social democratic organisations, from the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom and the media unions, to the left-wing press, with Red Pepper magazine, for instance, devoting much of its April 1998 issue to the case for restrictions in ownership. At best, this approach harks back to the state-run panacea of pre-Thatcherite days; at worst, it nadvely isolates the issue of changing the media from changing society in general. As an anarcho-syndicalist, I would point out that in any discussion of what type of media we should have, it would be appropriate to ask at the same time what kind of society should that media be reflecting. And the answer to that question is neither of the brands of capitalism offered so far in this debate.

know the rules

Before discussing issues like democracy, free speech and society, a closer look at media corporations in Britain will set the scene. It would certainly be wrong to think of the British media industry as one unified bloc. Quite apart from the fact that they are all capitalist concerns in competition with each other, there is another level on which their interests diverge. On one side is Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, on the other, the rest of the industry.

The British Media Industry Group (BMIG) was formed in 1993 by Pearson, Associated Newspapers, The Telegraph, and the Guardian Media Group, to lobby for reform of the cross-media ownership rules in the 1990 Broadcasting Act, which was brought in under Thatcher. What these companies had in common was to be trailing in Murdoch's wake because, as a foreign-owned company, News Corporation wasn't covered by the Act. By 1993, Murdoch was in control of 37% of UK national dailies and 40% of BSkyB, the satellite broadcaster.

A few months later, in January 1994, the Department of National Heritage announced a review of the rules. ITV companies such as Carlton, Granada and Meridian, were eager to grab more franchises and played on the Tories' fears that the British independent broadcasting sector would be gobbled up by foreign media groups if British media companies could not expand. With growth in the satellite and cable sectors, and promised, but as yet unproved, millions to be made in multi-media and digital broadcasting, de-regulation of the ownership rules was seen as essential to allow British companies to compete internationally.

Given the need to confront Murdoch in a period leading up to a general election, however, progress was predictably non-existent. But action could no longer be put off when an explosion of outrage greeted news that BSkyB had a 20% stake in a bid to run the new Channel 5. The cross media ownership proposals of May 1995, therefore, owed much to the thinking of the BMIG, and restricted ownership to 10% of the total British market, and to 20% of any particular sector, be it press, TV or radio.

Not surprisingly, Murdoch condemned the new rules, accusing his rivals of pandering to state regulation. Incidentally, in the aftermath of all this, New Labour weren't slow to cosy up to the one-time arch-ogre. Two months later, Tony Blair was to be found addressing Murdoch's top management, outlining his concerns about the "immense power" of the proposed media regulator. With Blair now safely ensconced at Number 10, talk of further changes is on the back burner.

the ad industry

The British media is a multi-billion pound industry, as shown by annual spending of over £3 billion on newspaper ads, and over £2.5 billion on TV and radio commercials. To compete for such money means that holding on to, and improving, market share and audience ratings has become an end in itself. This, in turn, has led to content becoming more and more dumbed down, 'Americanised', lowest common denominator trash, cleansed of the uncomfortable and controversial. At the same time, coverage of current affairs has become increasingly trivialised, dominated by celebrities, and indistinguishable from the output of press agencies and public relations bureaux.

The fate of Granada's World In Action seems typical. After losing a libel case to Marks and Spencer, Granada, intent on expansion, and turning its back on investigative journalism, has now overhauled World In Action, which looks set to join First Tuesday and This Week on the current affairs scrapheap. This decline in investigative journalism, due to commercial "constraints", is mirrored in the press where total staffing is estimated to have fallen by at least 40% between 1977 and 1993, while the total number of newspaper pages has risen by 72%. Costs get cut; staff get down-sized; but profits just carry on rising.

Nor are the so-called quality broadsheets or the BBC untouched by such economic pressures. Just as much as The Sun or The Mirror, the likes of The Guardian have to attract advertising revenue and if moving "down-market" is the only way to do it, then so be it. Even the BBC, which doesn't compete for advertising, still has to defend its TV ratings, otherwise to defend the continuing tax on TV (the TV licence), would begin to become untenable if audience figures, already on the wrong side of the 50% mark, drop much further. And indeed, recent history at the Beeb has not only involved chasing ratings, but also cutting costs, selling off assets, and expanding export sales.

In fact, while British TV productions earned £234 million in foreign sales in 1996, over £500 million worth of programmes were imported at the same time. In order to attract foreign viewers, then, British TV productions are becoming more like the American programmes that account for 81% of Europe's total TV imports.

death of democracy?

On the face of it, there would seem to be a pretty good case for rolling back the de-regulation process. The argument goes something like this. There is increasing concentration of the media among fewer and more powerful owners, caused by unregulated competition for advertising revenue and sponsorship. This couples with "tabloidisation" — in other words, decreasing diversity, less variety of expression, and fewer demands on audiences and readers, caused by the commercial pressure to appeal to as wide an audience as possible. The net result is these few big

media owners will be able to exert an undue influence in shaping public opinion. In support of this view, the left use examples like the effects of the Tory press on British general elections in the past two decades and Silvio Berlusconi's rise to power in Italy through the use of his media interests. Curiously, The Sun's role in the Tories' downfall is usually not mentioned.

Your stance depends on your point of view on whether choosing one bunch of dodgy politicians over another every five years is the sanest way of running society. As long as some media tycoon, or group of them, doesn't appear to be affecting the outcome, then there's no problem. Anarcho-syndicalists have always put forward the point of view that democracy and free speech is about a lot more than choosing our rulers every few years.

In any case, much of this "undue influence" argument is merely a reaction to the perception that the right wing press kept the Tories in power for nearly two decades. Will the point be as strongly argued if the Tories now appear to be kept out of government? Would it have even been put forward at all, if media support for the main political parties had appeared more evenly split? I think not.

The main point is that true democracy involves the participation of everybody in the decisions which affect their lives; and true free speech involves people having equal access to the means, educational as well as physical, to enable them to put forward their own point of view. The society we live in, on the other hand, restricts such opportunities to a chosen few. The public service sector is just as guilty as any other part of the media in defending this unequal system, making the claims that it defends democracy and free speech somewhat laughable. Being the propaganda arm of the capitalist state it would be surprising to find otherwise. Biased views, twisted reporting, and slavish regurgitation of state propaganda are as true of the BBC as of the tabloids. We don't have to cast our minds back too far for a few examples — the miners' strike, northern Ireland, even coverage of the Labour Party of the 1980's and early '90's. There are plenty more.

I do not wish to promote or protect the interests of private multinational media corporations. Far from it. I do question, however, the basis on which one section of the capitalist media is deemed worthy of support against another. An analogy might be appropriate. Anarcho-syndicalist transport workers opposed privatisation of the railways, not on the grounds of defending state control, but to raise the idea of workers' control within the debate on the best way forward for rail workers. This went alongside the strategy of encouraging workers to take action. The fact that only a small amount of action took place and it did not lead to more widespread action, or to the scrapping of privatisation plans — never mind workers' control — makes it no less valid to put this alternative forward.

Likewise in the current media debate. When workers in the media industry have taken action in the past there has never been any question of anarchosyndicalists supporting them. This would still be the case if media workers were to begin a campaign against any privatisation moves in the BBC. We would still feel free to point out the many failings of the state broadcasting system, and to put forward alternative, radical ideas for bringing about real democracy and free speech.

But to ultimately change the media fundamentally will take much more than merely fiddling around with media ownership and market quotas.

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Retrieved on January 15, 2009 from web.archive.org
Published in *Direct Action* #9 – Winter 1998.

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