



media policy

101

what you need to know to change the media system

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INTRODUCTION

Why Care About the Media?

Media reflect and influence our world. We spend hours exposed to TV, radio, CDs, books, newspapers, magazines, billboards and the Internet. But these forms of media are increasingly controlled by a few massive corporations. They decide what is news and what isn't, what information we receive and what we don't. They shape our understanding of social, cultural and political issues.

SURROUND SOUND NATION

The average American spends over 4 hours a day watching TV.¹

78% of American adults listen to radio every day.²

88% of online Americans say the Internet plays a role in their daily routine.³

The average American teenager will spend more hours per year watching TV than in school (1,023 for TV vs. 900 for school).¹

On average, an American child will view 40,000 commercials per year.¹

Sources: (1) TV Turnoff Network; (2) Radio Advertising Bureau; (3) Pew Internet & American Life Project.

No matter what you care about most — the economy or the environment, civil rights or gun rights — media influence all issues by shaping the beliefs, values, and opinions of the public and policymakers.

People notice that they're missing out on important information and perspectives: "Why don't we ever hear about this issue in the media?" Hear that question enough times, and you realize that the media itself is an issue.

Our media system is not the product of a natural evolution or market forces. It's the result of policies created by Congress and other decision makers — under heavy influence from Big Media lobbyists. ***A key to creating better media is to create better media policies.*** Citizen activism brought us the

40-hour work week and gave women the right to vote, and it will be citizen activism that brings us the quality media we deserve.

SYMPTOMS

Symptoms of the Media Problem

People from all backgrounds and beliefs are concerned about the state of our media system. You don't have to be a scholar or an expert to notice the symptoms of our media problem. For example:

Important issues are ignored.

Instead of quality journalism about vital issues, we get 'infotainment' — sensationalism and celebrity gossip. Entertaining or dramatic stories that have no impact on our lives are presented as news, while key stories about social and political issues are left uncovered.

Most of what we see and hear is homogenous.

TV and radio all play the same types of copycat programs. News stories don't vary much and there's little diversity of viewpoints. Local perspectives are vanishing, so the media looks the same from Alaska to Florida.

Society is misrepresented.

Media reality is totally different from real world reality. We rarely see or hear ordinary people in the media. Minority groups are under-represented and misrepresented.

Advertising is out of control.

We're bombarded with commercials, billboards, 'product placements' in movies and TV shows, even entire programs developed to sell spin-off merchandise. Americans, including young children, are becoming more materialistic.

Violent and sexually explicit images are everywhere.

Irresponsible and unnecessary sensationalism comes at us from all directions. People are becoming more fearful as a result of these messages.

ROOT CAUSES

Profit Trumps the Public Interest

Most of the media that we see and hear is produced to make a profit — not necessarily to provide useful information and quality entertainment that accurately represents our society or fosters a healthy democracy.

It works like this: commercial media generally make money through advertising. They sell advertising space to other companies who want to reach the media's audience with ads. The more people read, watch, or listen to a particular program, the more money advertisers pay to place an ad in that program. Advertisers also pay more for an ad during a program that reaches wealthy viewers (or other targeted demographics).

FROM THE HORSE'S MOUTH

"If anyone said we were in the radio business, it wouldn't be someone from our company. We're not in the business of providing news and information. We're not in the business of providing well-researched music. We're simply in the business of selling our customers products."

Lowry Mays, CEO of radio giant Clear Channel Communications

So media companies create 'content' (shows, articles, etc.) that attract the best audience for advertisers — not content that serves the best interests of the public.

For example:

- Controversial issues are ignored to keep advertisers happy.
- Entire segments of our population — African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, Native Americans, low-income people, rural populations, and others — are ignored or misrepresented because they aren't the advertisers' target audience.
- Local political affairs, viewed as a ratings loser, are ignored.
- TV networks rely on violent or sexually explicit programming to grab the most "eyeballs" and get the highest ratings.
- News becomes just another source of profit. Cost-cutting results in lower-quality news reporting and less investigative journalism.

ROOT CAUSES

A Handful of Corporations Control the Media

The federal policies that govern media ownership let a handful of extremely powerful corporate giants control the media industry. Through mergers and takeovers over the past few decades, major conglomerates have swallowed up independent media companies, reducing the diversity of voices in the media market while intensifying the conglomerates' influence.

Together, the Big Media giants control almost everything we see and hear. Bertelsmann, Disney, General Electric, News Corp., Sony, Time Warner, and Viacom are truly huge conglomerates: not only do they produce and own multiple forms of media, such as books, magazines, newspapers, TV programs, and movies, they also own the companies in charge of distributing these media to us.

Today's media owners not only decide which musical artists, TV programs, and information reach us — they also decide how much we pay for it, how it's distributed, and what we can do with it once we have it. This gives them tremendous power. It's simple: You control the information and you control the nation.

INDEPENDENT VOICES ARE FADING

- Since 1975, two-thirds of independent newspaper owners and one-third of independent TV owners have disappeared.¹
- Only 281 of the nation's 1,500 daily newspapers are now independently owned.²
- Minority ownership of broadcast media is now at a ten-year low — a mere 4% of radio stations and less than 2% of TV stations are owned by people of color.³
- The number of radio station owners has plummeted by 34% since 1996, when ownership rules were loosened. That year, the biggest radio owners controlled fewer than 65 stations. Today, Clear Channel owns over 1,200 — more than 1 in 10 stations.⁴

Sources: (1,3) Writers Guild of America – East, (2) Consumer Federation of America, (4) Federal Communications Commission

ROOT CAUSES

Citizens are Shut Out of the Media Policy Debate.

Through well-financed lobbying operations, media corporations have overwhelming influence in Washington. Media policy is shaped in closed-door meetings with policymakers — in fact, several sections of the disastrous Telecommunications Act of 1996 were actually *written* by media industry lobbyists. So, even though *we* own the airwaves, *they* decide how media is created, financed, and distributed.

THE NUMBERS SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES

\$222 million

Amount spent by the broadcast industry to lobby the U.S. government from 1998 to 2004.

2,500

Number of all-expenses-paid trips taken by FCC employees from 1995 to 2003 that were funded by media corporations and associations.

71

Number of times FCC officials met behind closed doors with the nation's major broadcasters before voting to relax media ownership rules in 2003 — directly benefiting those companies.

5

Number of times FCC officials met with consumer groups working on that same issue in 2003.

Source: Center for Public Integrity

We are so far from the media policy debate that we don't even hear that these debates are happening. Mainstream media conveniently ignore stories about media policy. For example, as the FCC was deciding in June 2003 whether to allow more media consolidation — a decision that would have a huge impact on all Americans but benefit only a handful of huge media corporations — the media owned by those corporations ignored the issue.

Surveys showed that the more people learned about the issue, the more likely they were to oppose media consolidation. It was no accident that news of the FCC's rulemaking stayed out of public view.

WHO OWNS THE AIRWAVES?

Believe it or not, we all do!

The airwaves (or “spectrum”) are what radio and TV stations use to broadcast to your radio or TV. The airwaves belong to you, in the same way that your sidewalks or parks do — they are a public resource. Media companies own the stations that produce the programming we see and hear, but they don’t own the airwaves that carry that programming to us.

Some businesses, like cell phone companies, pay the government a fee to use sections of the airwaves. But radio and TV broadcasters, despite making enormous profits from them, pay nothing for their use of the airwaves. Instead of fees, they’re required by law to serve the “public interest” through their programs; in return they receive the privilege of broadcasting.

Even though citizens own the airwaves, we’ve been shut out of the debate on what constitutes “public interest” and how these airwaves should be used. But because the airwaves belong to us, we have a legitimate platform from which we can change the rules and change the media.



THE CURE

Change the Rules, Change the Media.

Attacking a single symptom of the media problem will not cure the disease. We must look deeper at the root causes — and solve them.

Government policies determine the structure of our media system, dictating how the system will operate and who will benefit. Many of our current policies create a system that benefits the media corporations' bottom lines rather than the public's need for real information and diverse viewpoints.

Changing the structural policies will be necessary if we want to see a media system that serves the people and provides more diversity, skepticism, accountability, and independent voices in the media.

CORRUPT MEDIA POLICY CAN CREATE PROBLEMS

**Deregulation of
Media Ownership**



Consolidation



**Homogenized
Viewpoints**

DEMOCRATIC MEDIA POLICY CAN CREATE SOLUTIONS

**Alloting Channels
on Airwaves for
Community Groups**



**Noncommercial
Radio Stations**



Diverse Viewpoints

THE CURE

The System Isn't Inevitable

Most people assume that the basic structure of our media system is natural or driven by “market forces.” But our whole media system — especially the structural aspects most of us don’t question — is the result of conscious choices legislators make about media policy.

Many of the differences between our media system and those of other countries are the result of how these policy choices are made.

For example, in countries like England, policymakers made different choices. They decided to support independent, national nonprofit broadcasters like the BBC, and to put limits on commercial broadcasting. Today, England benefits from these policy decisions: its strong public broadcasting system provides independent information and cultural programs.

As you can see, policy changes shape the system. The U.S. does have inroads for citizen influence, but they have been downplayed and under-used. The following pages illustrate how policy decisions get made. Citizen activism *can* affect policy.

If we change the rules, we can change the media!

A LITTLE HISTORY

When radio first began, it looked very different from the way it does today. In the 1920’s, a third of all stations were run by non-profit groups. Many other stations sold airtime to citizens for their own use. In fact, less than 5% of radio stations could be considered “commercial” stations making money through advertising.

But in 1927, the Federal Radio Commission (FRC) was formed to divvy up space on the radio airwaves. Influenced by emerging commercial broadcasters, FRC policymakers made numerous conscious decisions to favor for-profit stations over non-profit and community stations (which they deemed “propaganda” stations).

The result? Non-profit stations dropped from 33% of broadcast time to only 2%. Advertising went from a marginal trend to a \$100 million-plus industry. In just a few years, CBS and NBC became immensely powerful and profitable national media chains.

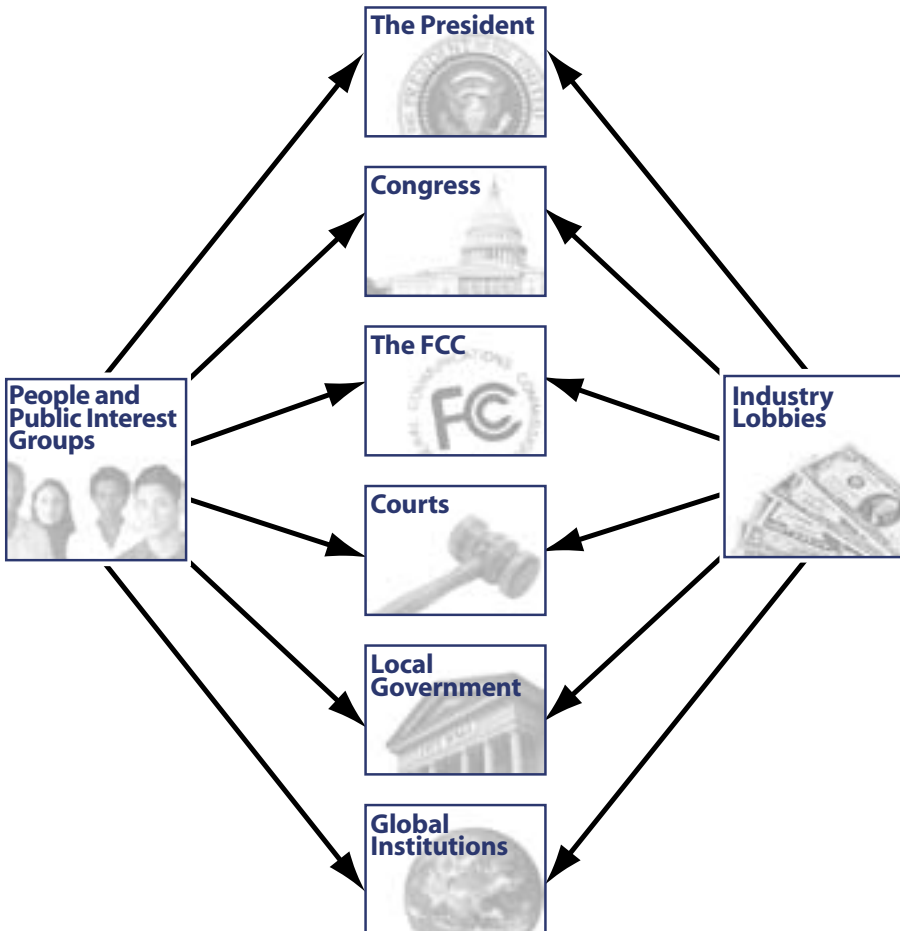
The moral of the story is that policies shape the system, and we as citizens must play a role in shaping these policies!

THE CURE

Influence and Media Policy

The media industry has one of the most powerful special interest lobbies in Washington. They work to get policymakers to shape the media system so it fattens the wallets of media corporations, even when doing so isn't in the public's interest.

But as voters, citizens, and constituents, we also have power to influence policymakers. We can't match the massive funds of the big industry lobbies, so we fight with people power. That makes it that much more important for people to join the fight, talk to policymakers, and spread the word about media reform.



THE CURE

The Players in Media Policy

The President

- Appoints FCC Commissioners and other posts
- Can veto media-related legislation
- Sets policy goals for the FCC, proposes media-related budgets

Congress

- Enacts media legislation (mainly through two Committees:
 - Senate Commerce and House Energy & Commerce)
- Appropriates funding for public broadcasting
- Can overrule FCC regulations

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC)

- Regulates broadcasting, telephone, cable & satellite companies
- Enforces regulations and Congressional laws
- Ensures that those who use the airwaves serve the public interest

The Courts

- Judge the constitutionality of the FCC's and Congress' laws
- Interpret First Amendment and copyright rights

Local Governments

- Negotiate contracts with cable companies that can provide public access TV channels and equipment
- Regulate billboards and advertising in schools
- Can implement media literacy curricula in schools

Global Institutions

- Can implement trade agreements that attack local, state, and national protections on media ownership and diversity

Industry Lobbies

- Pressure elected and appointed leaders
- Influence elected officials' access to airtime and media coverage

People and Public Interest Groups

- Lobby, propose legislation, educate, activate, protest, and influence all of the above players

THE CURE

Policy Solutions for Media Problems

Ensure diversity of ownership

We'll never have a fair media system if a handful of companies are allowed to control all the ways we receive information. The consolidation of corporate ownership of our media has not only reduced diversity of viewpoints, it has also reduced racial, ethnic, and gender diversity in media.

In the future, “convergence” of different media like radio and TV with the Internet may make it possible for one company to serve as gatekeeper, controlling what media you receive and how much you pay for it.

- The FCC should establish sensible ownership limits for media corporations and break up huge media monopolies.
- Congress and the FCC should create tax incentives and licensing regulations that increase the number of people of color and women who own media outlets.

Support and subsidize noncommercial media.

Noncommercial media in all its forms — from NPR and PBS to public access cable TV to independent web sites — provide alternatives to corporate media and enrich our democracy and culture.

Because these media aren't burdened by a profit motive, they can support innovation, dissent, and diversity. They can cover controversial topics without fearing backlash from commercial sponsors or politicians and can present cultural programming that advertisers would be hesitant to support.

- Congress should increase funding for public broadcasting and insulate it from political and economic pressures by creating an endowment fund.
- Local governments should require cable companies to increase funding and public access for community media productions.

THE CURE

Hold media accountable to the public.

Cable operators, satellite broadcasters, and TV and radio stations are legally required to provide benefits to our society in return for using our public airwaves. However, the definition of how to meet this public interest responsibility is murky and enforcement is minimal.

The result: media outlets make billions in profit from our airwaves but shirk their duty to provide programming that's beneficial to society.

- The FCC and Congress should specifically define how media companies must meet their public interest obligations — and require broadcasters to prove they fulfill these obligations in order to get their licenses renewed.
- Congress should mandate that the FCC expand citizen participation in media policy decisionmaking by holding widely publicized public hearings on important issues.

Give communities access to their own airwaves.

While corporations get almost all of the space on the radio dial, TV channels, and other parts of the airwaves, regular people who want to start a radio station or other media project are left out.

The public airwaves should serve the public, not just a handful of powerful corporations.

- Congress should authorize the FCC to issue additional community radio station (Low-Power FM) licenses to fill the empty space in the radio dial with local voices.
- The FCC should allow unlicensed use of the airwaves for wireless Internet and “smart radio” technology. This could make the Internet more accessible and affordable. It also provides ways for everyone to have a voice over their airwaves.

THE CURE

What You Can Do

✓ **Become a Free Press e-activist.**

Sign up to get free periodic e-mail alerts and updates that keep you on the cutting edge with easy actions you can take to help reform the media. These alerts are occasional, and your privacy will always be respected. To sign up, go to www.freepress.net.

✓ **Tell your legislators in Congress how you feel about the media.**

Calls and letters really do make a difference in getting members of Congress to pay attention to media reform efforts. At www.freepress.net/washington, you can find contact info for your elected officials and learn about their voting records on media issues. Alternatively, call the U.S. Capitol's switchboard at (800) 839-5276 and ask to speak to the office of your Senator or Congressional representative.

✓ **Organize!**

Any actions you take for media reform will be multiplied if you organize support from others. Every time you sign a petition, call your Senator, or write a letter to the editor, encourage a couple of friends to do the same. Better yet, start a working group to meet regularly and plan coordinated actions.

THE CURE

✓ **Speak out for media reform.**

Talk to friends, family, and colleagues about media reform. Bring up the issue at other meetings you attend. Write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper and call in to talk radio shows. Spread the word!

✓ **Get involved locally.**

Many media policy issues can be addressed locally. You can protest the renewal of a local broadcaster's license, win public access channels and lower cable rates through your city's negotiations with the cable company, or get your school board to implement media literacy curricula in local schools.

To see a list of groups working on media reform near you, check out www.freepress.net/orgs. You can also check in with your local community access TV station, independent media outlets, or city government to see who else is working on media issues in your town.

✓ **Learn more.**

Good advocates are informed advocates. Visit the Free Press website at www.freepress.net to get comprehensive information on media reform issues and actions. Or pick up a book such as *The Problem of the Media* by Robert McChesney, *The Media Monopoly* by Ben Bagdikian, or *No Logo* by Naomi Klein. For documentaries on media reform and media literacy, visit the Media Education Foundation at www.mediaed.org.

Get specific activist tips and resources for media reform activism in our *Media Reform Action Guide*, available online at www.freepress.net/tools.

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Regular membership includes a free copy of *The Problem of the Media*, written by Free Press co-founder Robert W. McChesney. Supporting members also receive McChesney's *Rich Media, Poor Democracy*.

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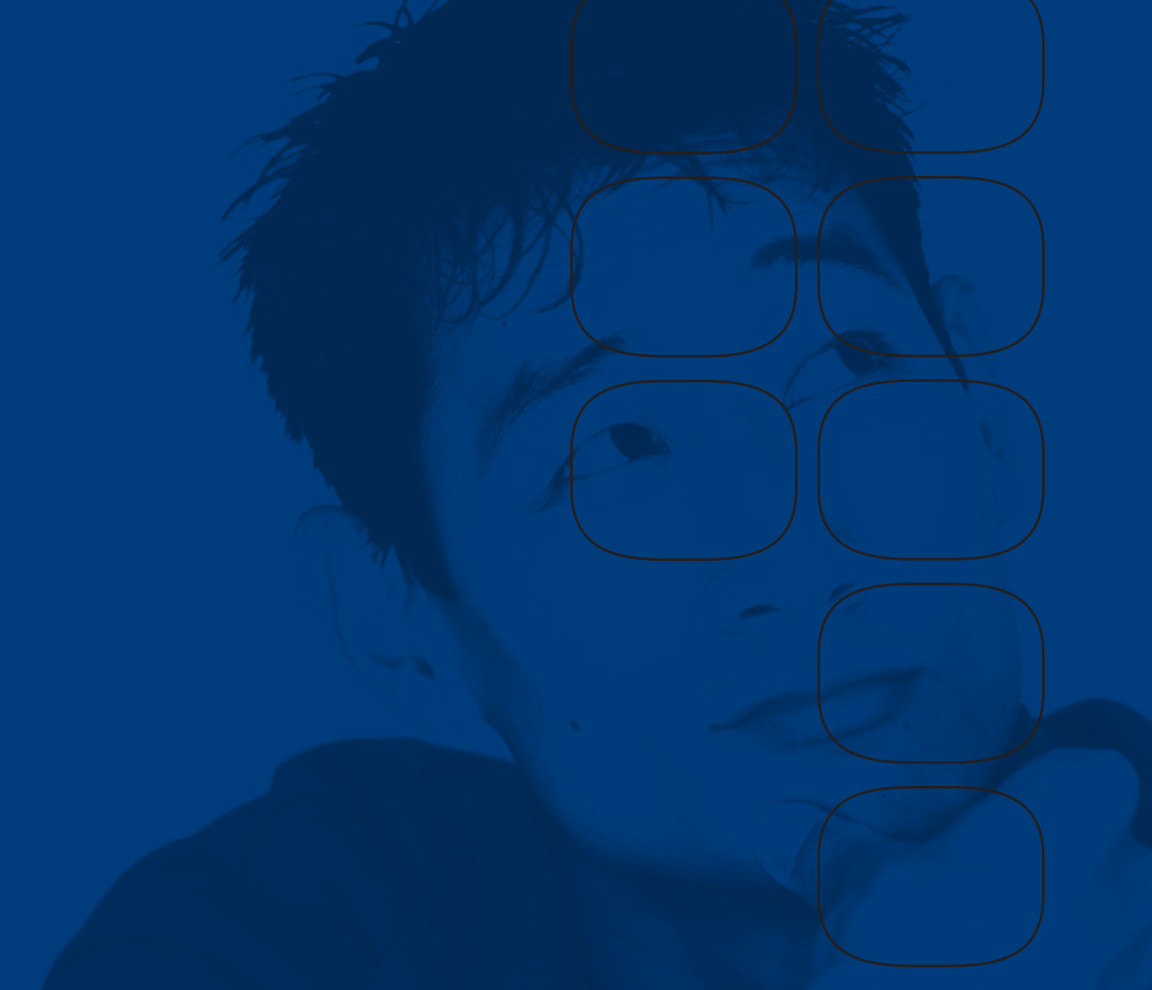
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Learn about the root causes
of media problems, who
makes the rules and solutions
for changing the system.

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