

The Age of McMedia*

The challenge to information and democracy.

Helen Shaw.

Fellow, Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, Harvard University.

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hshaw@wcfia.harvard.edu.

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Abstract:

When a handful of conglomerates control the US, and much of the global media landscape, what happens to the public's right to information as defined by Article 19 of the UN Human Rights Charter? What impact does media consolidation have on the Jeffersonian ideal of an "informed democracy", particularly in a time of conflict? And finally, what role should public broadcasting play in supporting a citizen's access to information and participation in democracy?

The US is now the most deregulated media market in the world and provides an international case history of the impact of the commoditisation of news. Without the counterbalance of a secure public broadcasting system, or 'public interest' regulation, the US media market is dominated by a few media giants with the real loser being the American public and its access to diverse information. The US now serves as a media laboratory to observe the challenge to democracy and information from ownership concentration.

“A popular government without popular information or the means of acquiring it is but a prologue to a farce, or a tragedy: or perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance, and a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives.” James Madison, letter to W.T. Barry, (August 1822).

“Enlighten the people generally and tyranny and oppressions of body and mind will vanish like evil spirits at the dawn of the day”, Thomas Jefferson, 1854.

“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to send, receive and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers”, UN Human Rights Charter, Article 19. (1948).

“Freedom of opinion is a farce unless factual information is guaranteed and the facts themselves are not in dispute” – Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (1961).

“There is always the danger that propaganda can ultimately prove more satisfying than understanding and that in the end; we would cease communicating altogether.” Carnegie Commission Report on Public Broadcasting Television, (2nd report 1979).

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The Age of McMedia/Chapter 1.

1. Introduction: From Plato's *Republic* to Fox News.

The control of the American news media by a handful of owners, wedded to the profit margin, has led to the commoditisation of news where news is a means of selling advertisement rather than imparting information.

Despite the commitment in the US Constitution's First Amendment to both free expression and a free press¹, the extremes of a deregulated marketplace in the twenty-first century leaves citizens without the knowledge and information needed to participate fully during elections or in a time of national conflict. Freedom of expression is worthless without adequate information, and freedom of the press is limited if the media is largely owned by a few global corporations.

Article 19 of the UN Charter of Human Rights defines a universal public right to receive and disseminate information.² It is a right which is not defined or protected in law but a concept which is increasingly under attack, not just from the traditionally forces of state censorship as envisaged by the Charter in post World War II Europe, but from a corporate marketplace where diversity of opinions and information is being undermined by the operation of new media monopolies.

¹ Amendment 1, Bill of Rights (1791) "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishing of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

² Article 19: UN Charter (1948) "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers".

In June 2003 the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) lifted many of the remaining restraints on media cross-ownership in the US, despite growing public concern over the concentration of media ownership and its impact on civic life.³ The deregulation is the most far-reaching in a generation and permits one media company to own up to three television stations, eight radio stations, a daily newspaper and a cable operator in large cities. For the first time a dominant cable operator like Comcast⁴ could merge with Disney or one of the other five media giants which rule US television.

While consumer advocates described the changes as a ‘blow to democracy,’⁵ the immediate impact was on the stock exchange with investors buying into media shares reflecting that the move to allow media companies get bigger will mean a handful of media giants getting richer⁶. ‘Media Merger Mania’, *BusinessWeek* called it reflecting that newspaper-TV mergers would be the immediate impact.⁷

Shares in Paxson Communications, which owns sixty-one local TV stations, doubled since mid May, reflecting the view that it was an attractive “buy”. Investment analysts predict that over the next three to five year there will be a major turnover in existing media businesses, with the big getting bigger.⁸

³ While mass public debate on the issue was low, a coalition of consumer, rights-based and some conservative groups mobilised in the final two months leading up to the June decision. The campaign was largely run through websites like MoveOn.org which had grown through the anti-war movement in 2003. Full page newspaper adverts were taken out in the final weeks targeting Rupert Murdoch as the ‘face’ of media concentration with the tag: “This Man Wants to Control the News in America. The FCC wants to help him.” The campaign clearly forced the mainstream media to cover the debate in the final two weeks before the decision. A campaign to reverse the decision was immediately launched and linked to some of the key Democratic 2004 Presidential hopefuls like Howard Dean and John Kerry.

⁴ Comcast bought AT&T in 2002 giving the company high speed capacity into 21 million homes and if combined with one of the five TV giants would create a formidable distribution and content merger.

⁵ Jeff Chester, Center for Digital Democracy.

⁶ *The New York Times*, “Changes Give Big Media a Chance to get Bigger”, 3/6/2003.

⁷ *BusinessWeek*, 9/6/2003, “Where media merger mania could strike first”.

⁸ *New York Times*, 3/6/2003. “Everyone in the business has to wake up tomorrow and ask. ‘Do I want to be a buyer or a seller?’” Barry Levin, former FCC commissioner, now analyst with investment bank Legg Mason.

The long-term implications of the June decision mobilised an electronic lobby which has managed to put the issue of media cross-ownership on the political agenda. By July 23rd the wave of non-partisan consumer lobbies forced a historic vote in the House of Representatives, where by 400 votes to 21, politicians voted to block the FCC liberalisation. The vote followed a Senate committee's opposition to the FCC judgement some weeks earlier but the White House remained set to defend the FCC even if it meant using its veto.⁹ The FCC, somewhat surprised by the late backlash against its decision defended it by saying the switch to cable TV had made regulation meaningless.¹⁰

In the US, where the role of the public broadcaster is weak, there is little counterbalance to a hyper-commercialized news media and the current debate over media cross-ownership has highlighted the fragile nature of information diversity even in the age of mass communications.

In America where a direct link between money, politics and television exists the real threat from such a narrowing of information choices is to the heart of democracy and democratic participation itself. For other Western democracies facing the challenges of media globalisation and the need to balance market liberalisation with media plurality the lessons to be learnt from the media laboratory of the US are stark.

It is a lesson which the House of Lords recently took on board in its opposition to the UK Government's new Communications Bill which is designed to relax media ownership rules and allow non EU media companies buy UK broadcasting businesses.

⁹ *New York Times*, 24/7/03 "FCC Media rule blocked in house in a 400-to-21 vote" by Stephen Labaton.

¹⁰ Michael Powell, Chairman of FCC, op-ed in *New York Times*, 28/7/2003.

A challenge, led by Lord Puttnam, better known as British film director David Puttnam, forced a last minute amendment which tied the Government to a ‘public interest’ clause whereby any media merger can be subjected to a media plurality test to ensure that new monopolies are not created.¹¹

The House of Lords stand was significantly influenced by media trends in the US and in case after case American examples were used to highlight the dangers of unfettered deregulation, from a radio industry lacking either music choice or news to a news industry dominated by a small circle of big business interests. Pat Mitchell the President of PBS, American public television, even addressed the Lords, in the run-up to the decision, to highlight the impact of media ownership on news.¹² The House of Representatives decision, in July 2003, to overwhelmingly reject a further consolidation of media ownership will serve to empower that debate in other legislations even if the FCC’s decision is eventually forced through by the White House.¹³

The new UK communications law will still permit an AOL Time Warner or Viacom to buy Channel 5 TV, or even ITV – the main commercial network, but the ‘public interest’ clause has effectively blocked any moves by Rupert Murdoch’s company, News Corporation Ltd, to expand its TV empire there, since it already owns BSkyB, a satellite TV company which epitomises media integration, and over 33% of the UK newspaper market.

¹¹ The last minute compromise reached, 1/7/2003, between Lord Puttnam and the UK Minister, Tessa Jowell, gives the broadcasting regulator, Ofcom, the power to intervene in media mergers to defend ‘public interest’ and ensure plurality. The amendment, which was frequently defined as the stop Murdoch clause, creates the concept of a value-based intervention rather than a mathematical definition of ownership limits. It equally moves the decision out of direct political influence by empowering the independent regulator although the head of Ofcom attacked Lord Puttnam’s amendment claiming it interfered with the ‘soft touch’ regulation approach.

¹² *The Guardian*, 2/7/2003. Ms Mitchell described a incident in North Dakota where a chemical spill went unreported, despite a hazardous toxic cloud around the town, because the six local radio stations belonged to a chain and had shut down local news.

¹³ *New York Times*, “Bush’s Four Horsemen, op-ed by William Safire. 24/7/2003. Safire deals with the mechanisms of Bush’s threatened veto.

In the States, the American media case histories which have been used with such impact in London are rarely covered or discussed on commercial media¹⁴. Here the combination of a news media market dominated by TV, controlled by a few corporations, without a strong public broadcasting balance, has left the American public poorly served in its news media coverage.

The gaps are many, but it is in foreign and international news where the absences are most felt. Since the 9/11 terrorist attacks and during the recent Iraq war and occupation in 2003 the lack of strong international news reportage, especially on television, has left the viewing public poorly prepared for the events unfolding.

Television cable news, the one media to grow significantly in audiences during the Iraq war¹⁵, ensured coverage came through a patriotic filter where few probing questions were posed. In a news market driven by commerce, dissent became unpatriotic, indeed unprofitable, post 9/11 and the standard journalistic instincts of getting to the truth and challenging the briefings were buried.

At the centre of the need of a free flow of information to secure democracy is the concept of an enlightened or informed citizenship underpinning a healthy civic society. And the source of that concept is the dialectic between Socrates/Plato and Aristotle on the nature of man and government. Is man fit for self-government?

Plato favoured facts over opinion, *episteme* over *doxa*, and believed a good society was one where the citizens were enlightened – not kept in the dark, but ultimately led by intellectual thought.

¹⁴ *The New York Times*, 'On Media Giantism', by William Safire 20/1/2003. The NYT's conservative columnist wrote a piece on "big media squeamishness" saying: "the truth is that media mergers have narrowed the range of information and entertainment available to people of all ideologies.

¹⁵ New York Times, 14/4/2003 reports Fox News has all top ten cable shows reflecting impact of war on 24/7 cable news channels. Average growth of 300% for cable news during the period. Top rating was 4.4 million for Fox Report with The O'Reilly Factor accounting for five hits during the week with an average of 4 million viewers each show.

His ideal vision was of the city ruled by philosopher kings. Aristotle, the defender of democracy, believed every man had not only the right to knowledge but self-government. “All men naturally desire knowledge”, he wrote in *Metaphysics*, and maintained man tended towards self-enlightenment.

For Plato man was by nature base and willing to ignore truth to maintain comfort. In the cave analogy in his work, *Republic*, humans live blissfully in the depth of the cave, the truth-teller who goes to the surface and come back with news of the sun is in danger of being killed.¹⁶ Much like Galileo who informed sixteenth century Europe that the earth revolved around the sun. The truth can be disturbing to the status quo.

Plato’s mentor Socrates, after all, opted for death rather than deny his right to speak. Socrates, as an anti-democratic voice, presented the most fundamental challenge to the concept of democracy and information - the right to speak even when you speak against that right¹⁷. As I. F. Stone described, in *The Trial of Socrates*, Socrates undermined the Athenian concept of democracy more by choosing the death penalty than by living his confined fate. Freedom of expression is an ideal hard for any society to live out.

But for Plato the distinction between knowledge, wisdom versus opinion, is at the very heart of his philosophical debate about society. For him, there was no truth without facts no opinions unless on a bed of philosophical or scientific truths. Knowledge he wrote is a power; the greatest power of all.

¹⁶ 515-520, Book V11. *Republic*. The cave analogy is one of human enlightenment and truth: “The power to learn is present in everyone’s soul”. Plato uses it to establish the rationale of philosopher kings, i.e. the enlightened; those who see the truth must govern.

¹⁷ Book V111 Plato’s *Republic* lays out Socrates views on democracy: “Extreme freedom can’t be expected to lead to anything but a change to extreme slavery, whether for a private individual or for a city”. Democracy is seen as second only to tyranny as a poor form of government with the philosopher-king as the ideal. Democracy is defined as the “supermarket of constitutions” where the city is ruled by those whose souls are directed by “unnecessary desires”.

Opinion, on the other hand, is neither wisdom nor ignorance. For Galileo the opinion of the court was in the end irrelevant; *Epur si muove* (and yet it does move) he reputedly said. The truth remained regardless of the opinions of the day. The earth still revolved.

Plato and Aristotle's argument over whether man could be trusted with knowledge or democracy is echoed in the debates of the 'Founding Fathers' over their visions of "an enlightened democracy". Jefferson wrote: "Enlighten the people generally and tyranny and oppressions of body and mind will vanish like evil spirits at the dawn of day".¹⁸

For a democracy to work and move from an aristocracy or oligarchy it needs an informed citizenship that participates and engages in the civic world. James Madison and Thomas Jefferson came in different ways to see an informed citizen as the safeguard for their democracy. "The information of the people at large can alone make them safe" Jefferson wrote while Madison saw "free communication among the people" as the core of self-government and the "only effectual guardian of every other right".¹⁹

Francis Bacon, the sixteenth century English philosopher and precursor of Mills, and Kant viewed information as the liberation of man. "Information is power,"²⁰ he wrote. Those who had it or access to it had power. For Madison and Jefferson, if the purpose was to extend and secure power, then success depended on the spread of information.

¹⁸ Quoted in Bailyn, (2003). Pg 53.

¹⁹ James Madison, as the author of the first Amendment, made this direct connection between popular democracy and information that free communications was essential for self-government to work. His most developed work on freedom of speech/press is in the Virginia Report 1799-1800 attacking the Sedition Act. In it Madison argued that the purpose of freedom of opinion and the press was not only the free flow of information but to make the actions of public officials accountable. The modern parallels with the Patriots Act and the Total Information Act, and the tension between state security and civic rights, are apparent.

²⁰ Emmanuel Kant, *The Advancement of Learning* (1605).

Madison's view of democracy was not one solely protected by free speech. It built on the Aristotelian concept of the public forum – on debate and deliberation. Madison recognised the need for civic engagement in public life, in debate and dialogue.

On the other side of the Atlantic the English philosopher and father of Utilitarianism, John Stuart Mill, wrote of the need for rigorous debate and diversity to underscore government when he said “it is hardly possible to overstate the value, in the present state of human improvement, of placing human beings in contact with other persons dissimilar to themselves...such communications has always been...one of the primary sources of progress”²¹. Or as one American writer, John Dewey put it, “no man or mind was ever emancipated by being left alone”. The interaction of people through the debate of ideas and knowledge or information is what creates an “enlightened citizenship”.

The concept of an enlightened or informed democracy underscores Madison's work in *The Federalist Papers*²². For the ‘Founding Fathers’ the first Amendment in the *Bill of Rights* became one way of safeguarding the constitution – the spirit of a people's democracy. Rather than state an absolute right it acts to block legislative restraints: “Congress shall make no law,” that prohibits or abridges freedom of speech or the press.

While media corporations have legally used the first Amendment to argue against any state regulation of the media, including media ownership, the Supreme Court has equally defined the first Amendment as ultimately a mechanism to defend the public's right to know.²³

²¹ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*. (1859)

²² Madison, *Federalist papers*, and Bailyn (2003).

²³ Supreme Court: *Red Lion Broadcasting versus FCC* (1969). Supreme Court upheld the FCC's regulation of private broadcasters: “It is the purpose of the First Amendment to preserve an uninhibited marketplace of ideas in which truth will ultimately prevail”.

For Jefferson, “We the people”, is the conversation of democracy. In the Declaration of Independence he took on the issue of what is truth: “We hold these truths to be self-evident”, that all men are created equal. But truths, as Plato would have said, are not self-evident – they need to be determined.

Indeed the lack of equality for black citizens, the issue of slavery, was one that came back to haunt the new republic and nearly destroyed it. The realisation of all men, and women, being equal, is one that is still being determined just as many rights are stated as ideals and then determined in law.

Madison and Jefferson recognised and feared that these “truths” would need to be protected and that this fragile concept of a republic, a democracy, might not survive the baser instincts of humanity. As Benjamin Franklin replied when asked, “What have you given us?” “A republic. If you can keep it”.²⁴

For Madison the power of information in the hands of the voters was the safeguard. “A popular government without popular information or the means of acquiring it is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy – or perhaps both”, he wrote.²⁵ Jefferson also saw universal education as one of the means of protecting democracy and clearly stressed the relationship between education and information.²⁶

Jefferson defined a free press as one of the central keys to the keeping of that democracy. “Our liberty depends on the freedom of the press, and that cannot be limited without being lost”, he wrote.

²⁴ The word ‘democracy’ does not appear in the US Constitution signed September 17th 1787. Franklin, at 81, was one of the oldest to sign. He was approached by the wife of the mayor of Philadelphia on the morning of the 17th and she asked him what form the new government would take.

²⁵ Madison, letter to W.T. Barry, August 1822: “Knowledge will forever govern ignorance, and a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives.”

²⁶ Jefferson’s Bill for the Most General Diffusion of Knowledge (1779) outlines his philosophy of universal education.

The challenges of a free press became very real during his own presidency and he came to see the difficulty in maintaining ‘truth’ in a highly politicised media but his aspirations remained defined by his statement: “where the press is free and every man able to read, all is safe”.²⁷

The essence of democracy for Madison was an informed conscience in the electorate, electing representatives on the “knowledge of the comparative merits and demerits of the candidates for the public trust”. This ideal would be echoed generations later in the Carnegie Commission report on *Public Television: A Programme for Action* (1967)²⁸ which established public television to fill an information and civic gap in what was seen as the then “vast wasteland” of commercial TV.²⁹

The concerns of the “Founding Fathers”, reflecting the Plato-Aristotle debate of ancient Athens, holds renewed significance in twenty-first century society where TV dominates and where TV news is frequently sold as a commodity to hook viewers to sell things. The ideal of Article 19, as set forth in the UN Human Rights Charter, now needs to be determined. If we recognise a public right to information as part of our universal human rights, and as part of a healthy civic society, we need to determine how we will make that right real.

²⁷ Bailyn, (2003) pg 52. Jefferson also famously wrote: “were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.”

²⁸ The Public Broadcasting Act (1967) was essentially written from recommendations of the Carnegie report *Public Television, A Programme for Action* (Harper & Row, 1967). The Commission, established by President Johnson, introduced the concept of public television: “We seek for the citizen freedom to view, to see programs that the present system, by its incompleteness, denies him”.

²⁹ Newton Minow, the then chairman of the FCC, in 1960 called commercial television ‘a vast wasteland’.

Fox News, the cable success story of the past year, particularly during the Iraq war, has taken the trend of news as product further by creating a deliberately provocative and conservative opinion-led news brand which parodies the idea of impartiality by branding itself “fair and balanced news”.

As Humpty Dumpty says in *Alice in Wonderland*, says “Here, words mean exactly what we want them to mean”. Fox News, the TV channel for the neo-conservative hawks of today’s America, has found a ripe niche and become a commercial success story³⁰.

The problem for the public is the rest of cable TV news, CNN and MSNBC, has chased and copied Fox so there is now little counterbalance to opinion-led news in the arena of American 24/7 news channels.³¹ Fox News’s positioning reflects the opinion bias in news media today where the op-ed pages in newspapers are often read before the front page.³² But for the public the question of where the truth lies has become more difficult to answer.

The obsession with political bias in the US media hides the reality that very few sources are attempting to deliver the news, particularly foreign news, and the public swims in a sea of often baseless opinions on talk radio, TV and newspaper columns.

³⁰ Fox News’ neo-con credentials were highlighted by the news in November 2002 that its chairman Roger Ailes, a former adviser to Presidents Nixon, Reagan and Bush 1, had advised President Bush in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Woodward: *Bush at War* (2002). According to Neil Chenoweth, Murdoch’s biographer, Murdoch personally hired Ailes to match the Fox News profile and paid out half a billion dollars to get his news voice onto air. In January 1996 Murdoch had announced he would launch Fox News to challenge CNN’s “left-wing” bias, reflecting a deep personal animosity between him and Ted Turner, and by October that year Fox News was launched.

³¹ *The New York Times*, “Wanted a New Personality for MSNBC” by Jim Rutenberg, 9/12/2002. Jeffrey Immelt, the chief executive of GE, NBC’s parent company, told the NBC board, the previous winter, he wanted MSNBC to draw as much attention as Fox News even if it meant featuring “clowns jumping out of airplanes”. After coming in third to CNN and Fox News Neal Shapiro, the News President, was ordered to do a revamp and left of center anchors like Phil Donohue were axed for a more Fox-style strategy. By the Iraq war in March/April 2003 MSNBC competed head on with Fox News for the most patriotic coverage with the American flag flying on screen.

³² Gunther/Mughan; *Democracy and Media* (2000); Tom Patterson “The United States: News in a free Market Society”, chapter 7, pg 250. Patterson quotes the former President of NBC News, Reuven Frank: “Every news story should ...display the attributes of fiction, of drama”. Patterson describes a movement away from factual to interpretive journalism.

The question is not whether the media is conservative or liberal but what information it permits into the public arena and what influences the filters it puts on that information. It is not so much what is colouring the news you see, hear and read but what is absent. Aristotle's intelligent man can decipher bias codes – what he or she can not do is imagine the missing stories or the silent voices.

A small and passing example: during the height of the Iraq war this year a genocide situation was developing in the Democratic Republic of the Congo where millions have already died in the civil conflict. However, little if any reference was made in any part of the mainstream US news media to the daily carnage there. Only the BBC's international service provided any clue to what was happening. When the Iraq war was over and the ethnic butchery in the Congo continued there was still few references to the situation or the need for international action. The only story that caught a sensational headline was that of alleged cannibalism.

2. Junk media: fast facts and loose truths.

The US, in 2003, seems a long way from Plato's cave dwellers or Madison's fears for popular democracy. At our fingertips are hundreds of TV channels, dozens of radio stations and, besides the ink print newspaper, the choice of a world wide net of internet newspapers. There is information overload, news everywhere, but then why do public opinion polls often show not just public ignorance but public misconceptions of events and facts?

For example, public surveys in the US showed, before the Iraq war, that the majority of Americans believed Saddam Hussein had a direct link to the 9/11 terrorist attacks and that at least one of the suicide terrorists was an Iraqi – despite there being no evidence to support this and despite none of the 9/11 dead terrorists being Iraqi citizens.³³ The mantra of the Bush administration, that a direct link exists, has not been established and the concept of a “repeated lie” remains unexplored by the US mass media.

One could say it is a democratic right to believe things, even if they are not true, and clearly the Bush administration's statements have created a public linkage.³⁴ But it is the media's role, as outlined by James Madison, in the Virginia Report, to hold public officials to scrutiny.

Just some of the unasked questions during the Iraqi war include the fabricated evidence of weapons and the circumstances surrounding the market bombings in late March 2003, the bombing of the Palestine Hotel and the US use of cluster bombs.

³³ *The New York Times*, survey of polls, “How Americans link Iraq and Sept 11” by Tom Zeller, 1/3/2003. Mark Schulmann, president of the American Association for Public Opinion Research, is quoted, in explanation of the results: “To say that there is no involvement of Saddam Hussein in Sept 11 is implicitly to question what our leaders are saying. And that is to start down a road towards suspicion and Watergate-like politics that no-one wants”.

³⁴ The President, George Bush, speaking on 25/11/2002, says ‘you can't distinguish between Al Qaeda and Saddam’. Defence Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, on 27/11/2002 says administration has ‘bullet-proof’ evidence of links between Al Qaeda and Iraq but offers no evidence. Speaking to the UN, Secretary of State, Colin Powell, 5/2/2003, says Iraq ‘harbours a deadly terrorist network’ connected to Bin Laden.

Indeed General Wesley Clark, on June 15 2003, stated on NBC's *Meet the Press* programme, that the Bush administration in the 24 hours following the 9/11 attacks had sought to get him to state there was a link between Osama Bin Laden and Saddam Hussein. Clark told anchor Tim Russert he was contacted by the Bush administration, while on CNN following the attacks, and was asked to connect the attacks to Iraq. He said he was willing, but where was the evidence? None came. Clark's comments, although made on TV, were not pursued by the media.³⁵

The lack of scrutiny in the US media has created a widening gap between the US and European public in terms of shared information and perception. For anyone watching news on a daily basis on both sides of the Atlantic, particularly during the Iraq war, the world views differ sharply.³⁶

This has been clearly seen, in the months following the war, in the different ways the UK and US media has handled the issue of alleged weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. In the UK the media demand for answers has put significant pressure on the British Government to clarify the accuracy of its war dossier presented to the House of Commons.

It led to a direct clash between the British Government and the public broadcasting company, the BBC. Prime Minister, Tony Blair's communications aide, Alastair Campbell, engaged in bitter public exchanges with the BBC Director of News, Richard Sambrook.³⁷

³⁵ A full transcript of the interview is on the website of FAIR, (Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting), a US media watchdog. FAIR points out that an NBC correspondent reported a similar story months after the 9/11 events but it was ignored.

³⁶ The different world views are reflected in the Pew Research, "Views of a Changing World" survey, June 2003, on attitudes to the United States and in particular the sharp fall in support for the States from the previous survey in 2002. Even in some countries which were part of the Iraq war 'coalition of the willing', e.g. Spain – hostility to the States was 53%. The changing view of the US reflects, in part, the different media images and news which people received. War coverage across Europe was far more likely to cover anti-war dissent, civilian casualties and the impact of bombing raids than US media.

³⁷ *The Guardian* 28 and 30/6/2003.

However in the US, media pressure on the Bush administration to answer the case on where the evidence was for weapons of mass destructions weapons has been low key.

The mass media market, which has developed in the States over the last twenty years, has ensured mass and market but the contextual evidence of an informed public, through opinion surveys, or an active electorate, through voter turnout and participation, are absent. Geneva Overholser, writing for the Columbia Journalism Review, writes: “the rap du jour against Americans, that we’re overfed and undernourished, applies here, as well: American is getting larger and larger and less and less well informed”.³⁸ About 80% of the US public claim, in surveys, that they get some news every day from TV, radio, newspapers or the internet. In 1994, long before the addition of e-news, that figure was as high as 90%.

But for many the exposure to news and information is short, headlines-orientated, visually based and sound-bite in style. Newspaper readership is declining and in recent surveys only *USA Today* and Rupert Murdoch’s tabloid *New York Post* showed significant increases while quality newspapers like *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *The Boston Globe* showed falling readership despite the impact of the Iraq war.³⁹

In 1998 the average US resident consumed 11.8 hours of media a week, predominately TV, with 60% of Americans saying they watched TV over breakfast.⁴⁰

³⁸ Overholser, *CJR*, November-December 2002. She goes on to say: “It’s not the public’s fault, but the media’s. The lack of international coverage renders debate ineffective. If we covered the world, people would know things, and if they knew things, their policy choices would likely be just fine”. Overholser writes regularly on newspapers for *CJR*.

³⁹ *The New York Times*, “Post Gains on Daily News in a New York Paper War”, April 2003. The Audit Bureau of Circulations reported that in the six months, ending March 31 2003, *USA Today*’s circulation rose 1.8% to be the most read newspaper in the States with 2.2 million copies followed by the *Wall Street Journal* with 1.8 million and the *New York Times* with 1.1 million copies.

⁴⁰ McChesney: *Rich Media, Poor Democracy* (2000). Media consumption reflects all forms of media and content. Over recent years TV consumption is actually declining in the US due to increased Internet use for on-line leisure activities.

Yet in the 2000 Presidential/Congressional election only about half the electorate voted and in the 2002 mid-term elections only thirty-nine percent turned out – the lowest turnout in any Western democracy for a national election. Richard McChesney, media specialist, calls it “democracy without citizens”.⁴¹ The decline in voting is more marked in racial minorities with African Americans being three times less likely to vote in any election than white voters.

Kevin Phillips, author and commentator, describes the US as a society with the widest rich-poor gap and the lowest voter participation in any developed democracy.⁴² “It’s closer to a plutocracy than a democracy but maybe we need to come up with a new word”, he said, speaking at Harvard University in October 2002, “one that reflects government by big business, but whatever it is, it’s no longer a democracy”.

He points out that the top 1% is now estimated to have gained 70% of all earnings since the mid 1970s and charges that politics in the States has become a marketplace where consuming, not voting, is the definition of participation.

Some commentators talk of a system which gives them the luxury of apathy through its stability⁴³. But turnout and participation have markedly declined in the age of mass media – at a rate more pronounced than in other democracies.⁴⁴

One reason is the unique commercialization of the US electoral system and the role TV and TV advertising plays in politics but another is the impact media ownership concentration and deregulation has had on the quality of information.

⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁴² Phillips: *Wealth and Democracy* (2002). Phillips quotes Supreme Court justice Brandeis: “We can have a democratic society or we can have great concentrated wealth in the hands of a few. We cannot have both”.

⁴³ Robert Kaplan, *The Atlantic Monthly*: ‘Apathy, after all often means that the political situation is healthy enough to be ignored. The last thing America needs is more voters – particularly badly educated and alienated ones’, quoted in Patterson (2002) pg 11.

⁴⁴ Gunter/Mughan *Democracy and Media* (2000), pg 444.

In the midst of multiple choices in media, information, or facts, can still be a scarce resource.

While Americans watch a lot of TV the amount of news/information they watch is declining. The FCC's own study shows the average TV viewer watches 2.5 hours of news a week⁴⁵. According to the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press only 32% of the public now sit and watch the TV evening network news compared to 60% ten years ago.

While cable news stations like Fox News showed a major upswing in audiences during the Iraqi conflict the evening network news shows experienced a drop in audiences, with CBS falling by over 15%.⁴⁶ The only network news to grow slightly was NBC, up just over 2%, which benefited from its cable news sister MSNBC which grew by over 379% during the Iraq war.⁴⁷ The imperative for the networks will be to add a cable outlet hence the attraction of the now aborted ABC-CNN merger.

Audiences for shows like *60 minutes* and *Dateline* have fallen sharply in recent years and NBC has just announced it is dropping one of its editions of *Dateline* in its Autumn 2003 schedule. Audiences for PBS news and CSpan, while small; have remained stable during this overall populist move from news.

In fact the trend for all TV watching is down with more evidence that people use their TV for videos, movies; i.e. entertainment rather than information. The news that is winning, like Fox News, is packaged as personality-led entertainment.

In the States newspaper readership has fallen dramatically and less than forty percent of people claim they read any newspaper in any form a day.

⁴⁵ The New York Times, "Fewer Media Owners..." 2/12/2002.

⁴⁶ New York Times, 14/4/2003, "Nightly News Feels Pinch of 24 Hour News" by Bill Carter.

⁴⁷ Ibid, Andrew Tyndall, of Tyndall Report, which monitors the newscasts, described it as "unprecedented" for network news to fall during a heavy news event. Neal Shapiro, president of NBC News is quoted as saying: "The reason we're up is we can show what's happening on two channels we have the peacock up in two places."

But the real change is when you look at age. Today 70% of people aged forty and under do not read a daily paper compared to 53% ten years ago.⁴⁸

People under thirty-five years are more likely to get information from the internet from headline pop-up or from music radio headlines. Those under twenty-five years on average spent a total of thirty minutes a day getting news, mainly headlines on music stations, down fifty-one minutes from eight years ago and the proportion of those in that age group who get no news at all is now 37% up from just 14% in 1994.

The “information impressionists”, as CBS News President, Andrew Hayward, labels the young, avoid news, politics and newspapers.⁴⁹ They come into contact with their information through radio headlines on largely non news channels or through their internet surfs.

The only medium with an audience trend towards younger audiences is radio and in the news front this has been good news for NPR (National Public Radio) which has shown growing younger audiences unlike the news profile in TV or newspapers.⁵⁰

The audience trends in the mass market have to be seen in light of this abundance of supply with the twentieth century explosion of media. Radio after all is only a mass market for the past sixty years with the development of cheap, mobile radios.

Mass television in the States took off in the prosperity of post-war 1950s⁵¹ while the Internet explosion is only ten years old and awaits the broadband expansion to realise its full potential. Indeed control of that broadband gateway is now a future focus for today’s media giants⁵².

⁴⁸ Pew Research Center, July 2002.

⁴⁹ Hayward was speaking at Harvard, 17/10/2002 on TV News trends. His address was broadcast by CSPAN.

⁵⁰ Pew Research Center, July 2002 and NPR audience research 2002.

⁵¹ L.Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic* (2003) chapter 7: “Segmenting the Mass”. As early as 1953 two thirds of American homes owned a TV set and by the mid 1960s 94 percent had at least one. By the end of the 1950s TV accounted for half of all advertising revenues in the States.

⁵² This would be the advantage of a Comcast – TV company merger since Comcast is the fastest growing broadband/cable network. *New York Times*, 17/3/2003 “Betting on Speed, Pure and Simple”.

But just as the ways in which we could receive information grew so did the potential to make money out of audiences and the twentieth century also saw the mushrooming of what Americans call Madison Ave; advertisement, marketing and public relations. What economist John Kenneth Galbraith called, in 1958, the institutions for creating desires; “to bring into being wants that previously did not exist”.⁵³

The electronic media became big business in the late twentieth century in a way that the newspaper barons of an earlier age could only dream. The barons probably for many of us encapsulated by Orson Wells’s satirical treatment of William Hearst’s life in the film, *Citizen Kane*, became powerful political forces ensuring they controlled as well as sold the news. But their power depended on the spread of literacy and indeed disposable income.

Radio broke through the literacy block and dominated the first half of the twentieth century while TV dominated the second. In today’s multi media world of cinema, video, audio, as well as Internet, the methods of providing content are multiple – but so are the ways in which advertisers can reach consumers.

For the TV executives audiences are eyeballs; sought in order to sell them to advertisers. Sumner Redstone, the chief executive of Viacom, the world’s biggest media company, described his global ambitions to the *Financial Times*⁵⁴ as “only four percent of the world’s eyeballs are in North American and we are shooting for the ninety-six percent outside of the US”.

⁵³ Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (1958), pg 155-60.

⁵⁴ *The Financial Times*, “Viacom takes its show on a widening road”, 8/11/2002. Sumner Redstone, in an interview with Tim Burt, described Viacom’s “cash-flow machine” ready to push acquisitions in new markets like the UK and Asia. “Our ad sales are going through the roof”, Redstone said – bucking the ad revenue trends for 2002.

Straight TV commercial spots are becoming less effective as marketing research shows viewers sit with a remote in their hand trying to escape the adverts so advertising company are continually seeking to exploit new ways to sell to audiences. Products are now 'placed' within entertainment drama shows like Sopranos and within many of the new 'reality' shows. On news channels most side-bars have some form of commercial corporate "sell" often reflecting the inter-locked shareholdings of the companies; i.e. MSNBC is constantly cross promoting to the two mother companies, their produces and affiliates.

The need to find new ways to sell and target consumers is highlighted by the bizarre news that people are now being paid to walk around with corporate banners on their forehead. A story in *The Wall St Journal*⁵⁵ described how AOL Time Warner paid students to wear CNX logos as temporary tattoos on their heads in order to push its action cable channel aimed at young people. "We want to be the first people to seriously use foreheads as media", Richard Kilgarriff, director of channels, said. "Guerrilla advertising is very popular".

⁵⁵ *Wall Street Journal*, 11/2/2003.

3. The global six: inside McMedialand.

Today, six giant conglomerates, Viacom, AOL Time Warner, Walt Disney Company, News Corporation Ltd, Bertelsmann and General Electric, control the bulk of the media landscape in the US, and much of the world. They have created, what media critic, Ben Baglikian, calls the ‘new media monopoly’, through rapid vertical integration where production and distribution are combined.⁵⁶

These six are global players; four of them are US companies, one is German and a third, Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation Ltd, is listed on the Australian stock market although Murdoch himself became an American citizen to overcome media ownership restrictions. But given the trans-national nature of their businesses they are global empires with often dozens of media brands interwoven under each umbrella. Indeed the frustration for these conglomerates remains the distinctly national regulations governing their industries which slow their media globalisation ambitions.

Summer Redstone of Viacom was in London, in November 2002, meeting Prime Minister, Tony Blair, to persuade the Blair and his Government to liberalise media ownership with the view to Viacom buying British TV assets. Rupert Murdoch, on the other hand, was at Congress in May 2003 attempting to convince it that his group, News Corporation Ltd, had no intention of benefiting from the soon to be liberalised US media market despite the fact he has just acquired the main satellite TV provider in the States. Congressional members responded by laughing.

⁵⁶ Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly* (2000): preface to sixth edition. He points out that other corporations like Sony, the Japanese company, Seagram’s, a Canadian drinks firm and AT&T, the US telephone/cable and broadband company (taken over by Comcast in 2003) were “on the prowl” to join the top six.

Telecommunications deregulation, in the US and worldwide, over the last decade, has ensured that millions of dollars are made everyday and that a vast array of multi-media content is available. But more has invariably not meant better and in some areas – like radio and newspapers – it has actually meant less choice and less information.⁵⁷

When Bagdikian first wrote his study *The Media Monopoly* in 1983 there were fifty corporations ruling US media. With each revision the number fell. By 2000 it was six mega-media giants with interwoven shares. “A private ministry of information,” is how Bagdikian describes it. William Safire, the conservative columnist with *The New York Times* describes the current media giants as ‘Bush’s Four Horsemen’ since Viacom, Disney, News Corp., and GE, have been to the fore in defending the FCC’s media ownership relaxation.⁵⁸

The big six (and it is a rapidly changing business) are:⁵⁹

1. Viacom: An American giant conglomerate (a merger of CBS and Westinghouse) which was described as ‘the world’s largest media company’ by *The Financial Times*, in 2002, and has a market value of \$74.3 billion. Viacom’s revenue for first nine months of 2002 was \$17.8 billion with pre-tax profit of \$3.3bn. Viacom has bucked the downward trend of advertisement in 2003 with capacity performance for CBS and MTV. Viacom’s stable includes CBS, MTV, Black Entertainment Television, UPN, TNN, TVLand, Country Music TV, and Nickelodeon. The Comedy Central channel is a Viacom joint venture with AOL Time Warner.

⁵⁷ Gunther/Mughan: (2002) pg 423.

⁵⁸ *New York Times*, 24/7/2003, Safire details the lobby machine behind the media giants.

⁵⁹ These pen pictures of the six media giants are based on the author’s own research drawn from media coverage in the business press and from the companies own websites. Only some of the companies’ diverse media interests are listed to reflect the broad range of their international activities. The ranking reflects media interests in the US in that obviously News Corporation Ltd is still expanding into the US while Viacom is expanding out into the UK and Asia.

Viacom owns 183 radio stations, 39 television stations, outdoor advertising, Paramount studios, Blockbusters video chain, Simon& Shuster books. Over 377 million people watch MTV channels in 166 countries and MTV alone is expected to lift Viacom's non-US turnover from \$100 million to more than \$1 billion. The Chairman and Chief Executive of Viacom is Sumner Redstone.

2. AOL Time Warner: US media giant represents a \$350 billion merged corporation of AOL and Time Warner. In 2000 it was described by The New York Times as "the largest communications company in the world" but it is now suffering the internet shares collapse of AOL. American Online, which was once strong enough to buy Time Warner, dropped its value by 40% in 2002 and is now considered the weakest link of the empire. AOL Time Warner owns CNN/CNN Headlines and the HBO cable channels among its many interests. The Chairman and Chief Executive is Richard Parsons, who took over the chairman's role when Steven Case controversially resigned⁶⁰ in January 2003.
3. Walt Disney Company: An American public company with extensive cinema, entertainment, TV and radio interests. Among them are; Walt Disney Motion Picture group, Disney Entertainment, Disney Channel, ABC TV network, Buena Vista Home Entertainment, Miramax, Touchstone Pictures, Touchstone TV, ESPN/ESPN2, 59 radio stations, including ABC radio, Disney radio, ESPN radio networks and a range of interactive and on-line interests.

⁶⁰ Steve Case, AOL Time Warner Chairman, resigned in January 2003, following the impact of losses following the AOL merger. Case was former AOL CEO and was the driving force behind the merger along with Gerry Levin the former Time Warner CEO. \$223 billion in shareholder wealth vanished through the merger, *BusinessWeek* 19/5/2003, "Can Dick Parson rescue AOL Time Warner?". Rupert Murdoch is quoted as saying Time Warner: "gave away their company for a mess of porridge, and they've got to live with that forever".

Disney is a shareholder in McDonalds. Disney Revenue in 2002 was \$25 billion with a pre-tax profit of \$3.7 billion. Disney has suffered losses in 2002-2003 due to the fall-off in entertainment venues since the 9/11 terror events and the poor performance of Disney brand cinema animation offerings⁶¹. The ABC network is also waning and is tied in 3rd placed with Fox for audience ratings. The Chairman and Chief Executive is Michael Eisner.

4. News Corporation Limited: An Australian listed global media group with worldwide assets in film, satellite and cable television, radio, newspapers, magazines, publishing and marketing. News Corp has assets of \$40 billion and total group revenues of \$16 billion. Its interests are in US/Canada/UK, Australia, India, Latin-American and Pacific Basin. Its TV empire includes BSkyB (main satellite TV content provider and distributor in UK – includes 24 news channel Sky News) Fox Broadcasting Co in the US which includes the Fox News) Star TV in Asia and Stream in Italy. Fox Entertainment generated \$523 million alone last year. Fox News, launched six years ago, has now overtaken CNN as the most watched cable news station. News Corp owns 175 newspapers mainly in Australia, the UK (including *The Times*, *Sunday Times*, *The Sun* and *The News of the World*) and more recently, in the US, with the acquisition of *The New York Post*. It owns HarperCollins publishing company, 20th Century Fox and its subsidiaries and a host of marketing, magazine and publishing interests. News Corp is keen to replicate its BSkyB success in the US following its purchase of DirecTV – a core satellite company previously owned by a GE subsidiary⁶². The Chairman and chief executive is Rupert Murdoch.

⁶¹ New York Times, “Surviving at Walt Disney, Eisner is Facing a Difficult Year”, 17/3/2003. C1 and C5. While the company’s revenue and box office ranking is up year on year, net income is down.

⁶² *The Economist*, 23/11/2002 ‘Viacom and News Corporation – Still Rocking’.

5. Bertelsmann: A one hundred and seventy year old German, privately held corporation. The world's third largest media conglomerate with cross media ownership in fifty five countries. It owns RTL, the number one cross-European TV and radio chain with twenty-three TV and fourteen radio stations in eight countries, Random House the world's biggest book publishing company with 10% of all English-language books sales globally, BMG one of the biggest players in the music industry, Gruner+Jahr, a major magazine and books interest in Europe and US. Bertelsmann has global sales worth \$20 billion a year with the US representing 31% of global revenues. Its profits before tax last year were \$924 million. The Chairman and Chief Executive is Günter Thielen who took over from Thomas Middelhoff who was very publicly ousted a year ago.
6. General Electric Company: GE is a pre-eminent US industrial conglomerate with 40% of its \$125 billion dollar annual revenues coming from long cycle businesses in engineering, energy, medical and 20% from short cycle business including its telecommunications and finance interests. GE, which boasts a one hundred and twenty four year old history stretching back to Thomas Edison and the electric light bulb, owns TV network NBC, and runs a joint cable news venture with Microsoft MSNBC. MSNBC has been tasked by NBC to take on Fox News. Its other cable interests include recent acquisitions cable movie channel Bravo and Telemundo, the second largest Spanish language channel, and it is a part owner of the cable History channel. The Chief Executive is Jeffrey Immelt who took over from the legendary Jack Welch in 2002.

These six companies have more media shares than the next twenty combined. While AOL Time Warner paid the price for the “biggest media merger ever”, in that America On Line was more an albatross than a convergence booster, the hunger and appetite for media companies to grow is expected to accelerate with the FCC lifting of restrictions on cross ownership in the US media landscape. Both News Corp. and Viacom, as the strongest performing media companies of the past year, are in the best place to reap the returns of a media takeover phase while John Malone’s Liberty Media is top of the wannabes list with his bid for the entertainment and cable wing of the Vivendi Universal empire.⁶³

The new ‘liberalisation’ will permit one conglomerate to acquire several TV stations/newspapers/radio etc so a single company could dominate TV news/information in a major market. It allows for an expansion of vertical integration with the potential for Comcast to merge with Disney or for Viacom to join forces with Echostar – the satellite service.

The June 2003 change raises the cap from 35% to 45% of the maximum share of national audience one company can reach with its TV stations. The FCC retained the dual network ownership bar, prohibiting a merge of any of the four national networks; ABC, CBS, NBC and public television PBS but in reality the strength of cable TV and the development of new cable-satellite mergers like News Corp/DirecTV will increasingly make such distinctions meaningless⁶⁴.

⁶³ Businessweek, 30/6.2003, “Cable surges Ahead”. The Vivendi media expansion reflected the trend to convergence in the late 1990s and the French company was forced to begin breaking up and selling the media interests, following major losses due to over-expansion, from 2002 onwards.

⁶⁴ According to Nielsen, the TV audience research company, by February 2003 48% of all TV viewers had cable and 7 broadcast channels commanded 45% of all viewing.

By June 2003 cable channels, for the first time, took more than half of prime time viewers with American homes spending on average 26.5 hours a week with cable compared to 24.4 hours a week for the free to air broadcasters like CBS, NBC, ABC and PBS⁶⁵.

Since five of the big six owns one of the five commercial news channels; CBS (Viacom), ABC (Disney), NBC(GE), Fox News (News Corp.), CNN (AOL Time Warner) it is not surprising that few of the five news channels have covered in any detail the recent FCC debate and decision on media cross-ownership. Disney's Michael Eisner put this conflict of interest, over ABC covering Disney, by saying the best solution was for ABC simply not to cover Disney – then the conflict was resolved.

Unfortunately the public, who rely on their TV news sources, equally do not get to understand the story. A notable, albeit rare, exception was Disney's own ABC news in May just two weeks before the FCC deadline of June 2nd, which ran two stories – one pro deregulation and one against it, in a clearly uncomfortable attempt to answer critics accusing the company of censorship.

The New York Times covered the story largely on its business pages and only moved it to the front page by May 14th, just weeks before the deadline, as the case was repeatedly being made by media consumer groups, like FAIR,⁶⁶ who were opposed to the media changes, that the story was being buried for corporate interests.

⁶⁵ *The Guardian*, “Cable flexes its muscle in the US”, 13/6/2003. Cable has 76% of the pay TV market but satellite is growing and set to grow faster following the Murdoch DirecTV deal. From March 2002 –March 2003 the number of satellite subscribers in the States grew from 17.8m to 19.8m.

⁶⁶ FAIR, a web based media lobby group, www.FAIR.org, has been operating since 1986. It states its aims are “to invigorate the First Amendment by advocating for greater diversity in the press and by scrutinizing media practices that marginalize public interest, minority and dissenting viewpoints.”

The FCC, headed by Michael Powell, son of Secretary of State, Colin Powell, has presented the issue as one of economics. Powell himself said the Iraq war was a case in point which showed why media companies needed to consolidate since such events were extremely costly.

This argument, while reflecting the reality that TV media groups spent billions of dollars on war coverage, made no reference to the very need for diversity of information and plurality of media presented by a war.

In his statement following the FCC vote, on June 2nd, to relax media ownership rules, Mr Powell said the changes were “vital” to “recognise the explosion of new media outlets for news information and entertainment”.

The FCC split on partisan lines for the vote with a 3 to 2 republican win but the opposition to the changes united some diverse lobby groups from The National Rifle Association, the progressive political lobby group Common Sense, the United States Confederation of Catholic Bishops, and the Parents Television Council.

According to the Commission more than 520,000 public comments, mostly hostile, were received in advance of the decision.⁶⁷ Hundred of thousands more comments, again mostly hostile, have been filed with the Commission since the decision.

One of the Democratic commissioners Michael J. Copps, who led a public campaign against the changes, said the decision, “empowers America’s new media elite with unacceptable levels of influence over the ideas and information upon which our society and our democracy so heavily depend”.

⁶⁷ *The New York Times*, 28/5/2003, “Ideologically Broad Coalition Assails FCC Media Plan”. Report states ‘broad coalition’ has formed, of both conservative and liberal organisations, to oppose change.

The six media giants are closely inter-related, and worked as a powerful lobby on deregulation. Their shared destiny is seen by the shareholdings each holds in the other and despite the intense personal competition of people like Murdoch and Sumner their goals are common.

One media leader, now frequently described in the business press as “a maverick” is the founder of CNN, Ted Turner who stepped down from the vice-presidency of AOL Time Warner, because he believes the now aborted merger between ABC and CNN would be bad for CNN.

Turner has criticised the deregulation and wrote in *The Washington Post* that it made it ‘virtually’ impossible for any small operator to launch, as he had done, with CNN twenty years earlier.⁶⁸

But market deregulation is usually good for the consumer. It can create competition, challenge monopolies and reduce consumer price. It can, and often does, achieve that but in the global economy it can also allow big players to swallow up smaller players and create mega global groups which form new monopolies where real choice disappears. When the commodity in question is information, one of the central pillars of a functioning democracy, issues of the public good and civic rights emerge.

⁶⁸ Op-ed by Turner, *The Washington Post*, 30/4/2003. Turner, who is still on the board of AOL Time Warner, went on to warn against increasingly power media conglomerates bending news presentation to serve their own ‘political and financial interests.’ He described the changes as one which “will stifle debate, inhibit new ideas and shut out businesses trying to compete”. He used the Iraq war as an example where news organizations tried to marginal voices and which showed the capacity of corporations to “cut important ideas out of the public debate”.

The Florida Supreme Court put it in a case involving the *Miami Herald*⁶⁹: “the right of the public to know all sides of a controversy and from such information to make an enlightened choice is being jeopardized by the growing concentrating of ownership of the mass media into fewer and fewer hands resulting in a form of private censorship”.

Or as *New York Times* columnist, Paul Krugman wrote,⁷⁰ “In short, we have a situation rife with conflicts of interest. The handful of organizations that supply most people with their news have major commercial interests that inevitably tempt them to slant their coverage”.

The print news industry gives a picture of how owner concentration affects people’s access to information. Today less than 2% of the country’s fifteen hundred dailies are family or independent owned.

Most are owned by mega national chains like Gannett, Knight Ridder, Newhouse, Dow Jones, Times Mirror, New York Times Co and Hearst. Some 99% of cities have become a newspaper monopoly and many cities, by the mid-1990s, had no daily newspaper at all.⁷¹

“With the best intentions in the world it is difficult for a monopoly daily to avoid complacency”, Leo Bogart media analyst wrote of the American newspaper experience of the last twenty years. Without competition the quality of newspapers has tended to decline.

⁶⁹ Florida Supreme Court: *Miami Herald* versus Tornills; quoted in Dean Alger, *Megamedia*.(1998).

⁷⁰ *The New York Times*, 29/11/2002. Krugman’s column was significant in opening the debate in the NYT and he wrote several columns from November 2002 - June 2003 on media plurality. His colleague, William Safire, a conservative, later wrote two columns equally attacking media concentration making the case that it was neither a liberal nor a conservative issue but one of democracy. *The New York Times* news coverage was muted until shortly before the FCC deadline. A piece, shortly after Krugman’s column, by Jim Rutenberg “Fewer Media Owners, More Media Choices” on the newspaper’s Business Day section. 2/12/2002 took the FCC’s line that the Internet had exploded choices making regulation obsolete.

⁷¹ Bagdikian (2000).

In 1994 The Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, Harvard University, published a paper by C Edwin Baker on newspaper ownership which looked at the social impact of newspapers chains and argued for a value-led appraisal of media ownership,

In Boston, the *Boston Globe's* competition on a daily basis, for a quality daily, feeding the needs of four million, is in fact its own mother newspaper, *The New York Times*. Less people are reading papers but equally fewer newspapers are being offered and the bulk of all newspapers sold in the US are chains, reflecting the interests of a handful of major businesses. In a country like the Republic of Ireland with four million people three Irish daily broadsheets are still available every morning plus one Irish tabloid as well as the entire fleet of the British daily press, both broadsheet and tabloid. It's a changing situation and that media diversity in small nations may end if press trends in other countries, like Germany where newspapers are closing, or Britain where independent newspapers are also becoming rare.

Newspaper concentration has not tended to benefit either the readers or journalism but it has allowed owners of newspaper chains to make more money by reducing the choices in the marketplace and increasing the profitability of a single offering.⁷²

The argument that it allows greater coverage of foreign affairs is not held up in that many groups simply answer the economies of scale by getting one correspondent to feed several chains rather than increase output from the international arena.

An example again is the Iraq war where in Ireland it was the public broadcaster, RTE, and the trust-based daily *The Irish Times*, who put Irish people into the field. *The Irish Independent*, part of the O'Reilly newspaper chain, used international reporters from the newspaper's family.

⁷² Baker (1994).

It is ironic now to read the then managing director of *The New York Times* in 1996, before the *Boston Globe* buy-out say: “it’s high time that newspaper corporations became subjects of debate and became held accountable for covering the communities they serve. Meanwhile many are managing their newspapers like chain stores with no sense of being important community institutions with highly important responsibilities to the public”. While *the New York Times* editorial pages argued against the FCC media changes the company itself had lobbied for greater flexibility for newspaper groups to move into bigger slices of the electronic market.

An executive with the international bank, Ansbacher, Chris Shaw, commented in 1983, that one buys media for profitability and influence - wealth and power. *Citizen Kane*’s version of Hearst saw the newspaper as influence as power; today’s media magnates see the cross-ownership of their media empires as machines not just to deliver profits but to guarantee profits for the future by exercising their diverse influences in politics, with the elites and with the mass audiences.

Hearst wanted to be President; Rupert Murdoch or Sumner Redstone know they have more influence by not being a political or national president but by running a global media empire.

News Corporation Head, Peter Chernin, in 1998, explained why conglomerations were the ideal within the media world: “So that regardless of where the profits move to, you’re in a position to gain”. By concentrating ownership those groups can maximise their profits regardless of where people move from TV to internet or from cinema to video. Vertical integration has ensured that some companies control all aspects of production and distributions as in the movie business where about six US firms dominate film-making and distribution.

While convergence may have gained a bad name through the empire-building of Vivendi Universal and AOL Times Warner, in that profits were not as forthcoming through piling all media activities together, the mega-media groups like News Corporation and Viacom are set to grow and grow. “Mergers and consolidations have transformed the cable network marketplace into a walled community controlled by a handful of media monoliths”: *Variety* magazine commented.

The range of cross ownership of the top five companies ensures only five percent of movies in the U.S are foreign due to Hollywood’s hold on production and distribution.

Jack Valenti, Head of the Motion Picture Association, dismisses the idea that movies not handled by the big studios can not make it and he points to small independents like *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* or *Bowling for Columbine* to prove the point.⁷³ Michael Moore of *Bowling* says despite the prizes and international acclaim it is still difficult to get his film into many mainstream multiplexes across America.

The safe money will be that the mega-media companies will continue to consolidate and grow globally. Murdoch’s empire is set to explode in the US, through his US satellite network, while the US giants like Viacom are set to expand eastwards to the UK and Europe. While the warning lights are flashing it is likely that the US experience of media deregulation will be exported and adopted by other free market nations although the debate generated in the UK, and the stance taken by the House of Lords, provides a framework for a non-partisan defence of values over markets in any future national discussion.

⁷³ Valenti addressed meeting at Harvard University, October 2002. His response in answer to a question from the author on the question of media ownership and ‘the closed shop of Hollywood’ was: “I don’t know anyone with talent who is left behind”.

4: Consumers not citizens: the commoditization of news.

The Mexican Nobel prize winning author, Octavio Paz, once wrote “the market is highly efficient but it has no goal, its sole purpose is to produce more in order to consume more”. The food industry, particularly the delivery of fast food comes to mind given the recent debate about McDonalds.

The only way for the food industry to increase its profit margins is to make people consume, eat more, even if that is counter-productive for its target audience by making them obese.⁷⁴ The need to increase profits means reduced margins, cheaper and lower quality product and a marketing philosophy that operated on hooking people to the product, i.e. the debate over the high levels of sugar and salt in fast foods which create a semi addictive quality in children.

The objective of fast food after all is not nourishment but quick satisfaction; sugar and salt rushes, fatty burgers and chips even when we know the fruit and vegetables are best. Equally in the age of McMedia the objective is entertainment not knowledge. The hook are those which, in the case of TV, will keep you from hitting the remote and grazing in cableland; hooks like crime, sensation, celebrity and naturally provocative opinion over any mundane fact.

The fast food industry, after all, has no obligation to ensure you have a balanced diet, as part of the marketplace it is fair game for them to exploit your desires and weaknesses to make money. We expect the consumer to be intelligent and informed in their choices.

⁷⁴ Kraft, one of the biggest food companies in the States appears to recognise the contradiction. In July 2003 it announced it was making its convenience food products less calorific.

The media industry would say the same; but given the central nature of an informed public to our basic views of a functioning democracy, is that correct? How indeed can the consumer be an intelligent, informed force without independent information? How can we expect the consumer to operate in his or her best interests if all the information relevant is not available to them? In the ‘fast facts, loose truths’ business of mass media a loss of context, depth and analysis is not a neutral force in our society. Without some sources of news/information produced outside the profit mechanism; through public media, trusts or not for profits citizens can not even be well informed consumers let alone citizens.

The New York Times critic Herbert Muschamp describes “the apocalyptic wastefulness of consumer society” where consumerism taken to its logical extremes creates four camps, the rich, the poor, the imprisoned and a tiny minority of the elite. Echoes of Plato here and his description of oligarchy – the society dedicated to money-making where the rich rule.

When the consumerist model is applied to the media we have the iceberg where the bulk of the population operate below the waterline in a fast information environment, where the poor has no voice, where the rich own the media and where the elite, a tiny and diverse elite has access to high grade information, like *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal* etc, and can manipulate the vacuum.

The poor in this society no more than in the west has no access to pay television, no access to the Internet panoply of interest groups and e-media, and no voice generally within the established McMedia world. They are not readers of newspapers, like *The New York Times* at a dollar a day, and operate outside the media’s interests since they are not the targets for advertisers. That after all is the core reason the media pursues you now to offer you as an eyeball or ear to their advertising market.

The citizen became defined as a consumer, somewhere around the 1950s, and it's ultimately more advertising, i.e. a message to buy and consumer more, which is being sold through the media today. William Paley, the CBS founder, put it clearly when he said "TV - it's a selling medium". The birth of television in the US was described as the arrival of a "selling machine" in your own living room, in an NBC instructional movie coaching advertisers on how to sell through the box.⁷⁵

Unlike in western Europe where radio and television began and developed as public good with either state or public entities running the broadcast enterprise in the US radio and television were first and foremost a commercial and advertising produce. The battle for public broadcasting came after the realization that the marketplace does not always provide what is good for society or the public.

The advent of the Internet, with its five million sites and more information than a lifetime could absorb, is often cited by the advocates of deregulation as the antidote to the current news media monopolies⁷⁶. Paul Krugman, in his *New York Times*' column, wrote that realistically the net does nothing to reduce the influence of the big five – the TV sources; "the Internet is a fine thing for policy wonks and news junkies... but most people have neither the time nor inclination". Pew research on public news habit support this with little evidence that people are using the internet as a news tool but that its increased usage is predominately e-mail communication and entertainment. The Iraq war though may have marked the beginning of the change with internet sites, particularly those with interactivity recording significant increases and an overall 70% increase in news website usage in week one of the war.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Cohen: (2003) pg 302.

⁷⁶ Chairman of the FCC, Michael Powell, writing in *USA Today*, 22/1/2003: "Americans now have access to a bottomless well of information called the Internet."

⁷⁷ David Bankoff of AOL Times Warner called the Iraq war the "coming of age" of broadband.

On the positive thought the Internet has created an alternative town-hall, particularly in the States, where dozens of websites run campaigns, lobbies, and news sites flourish. Since the States has the world's fastest growing broadband community, with 70 million Americans with access to broadband, mostly in work, and 12 million homes subscribed to broadband modems, it has created an another media platform.

The success of the MoveOn.org site which now claims over a million subscribers is one example but so is the impact of alternative news sites breaking stories the mainstream media often chooses to ignore.

The former Senate Majority Leader, Trent Lott's fall from grace came not because the media reported the racism comments he made, on live TV, but because it was picked up by alternative web sites which forced the newspapers to back note.⁷⁸

So the 'McMedia age' has come to mean more media owned by less people making more money but not necessarily providing more choice, quality or competition. Advertisers hunt the lucrative AB spenders between 25-45 and consequently most commercial forms of radio and television seek this segment of society.

Commercial radio, since deregulation in 1996, has largely left the news and information market to NPR because radio advertising clients want under thirty-five and mainstream music choices are both cheap and effective in reaching them. Independent, i.e. not part of a chain, radio stations, in a fully deregulated market are rare and in most markets de-regulation has actually reduced the diversity of music options and provided few if any speech options.

⁷⁸ Trent Lott, speaking at a 100th birthday celebration for Strom Thurmond, December 2002, which was broadcast on CSPAN, and in the presence of key editorial figures from Washington, made a nostalgic reference to the segregationist party that Thurmond had led. The comments were ignored by the media for several days but the Washington Post ran with the story after internet websites had made the charge of racism.

The 1996 Telecommunications Act lifted key ownership limits in the radio market and six years later a handful of companies dominate the radio scene.⁷⁹ Viacom, Clear Channel, Disney and Entercom hold two-thirds of audience for news radio stations. The typical news radio staff went from four point five people in 1994 to one point six in 2002. Michael Turner of the Information Policy Institute says owner concentration meant less jobs and less content: “National and regional news has replaced local news”.

A survey in *USA Today*,⁸⁰ one of the few mainstream media sources to cover the issue and present both sides of the debate, showed the 1996 Communications Act had led to more radio stations but less choice, more owners but less diversity. Indeed the debate over the declining choices in radio ensured the FCC left the radio industry out of further liberalization in its June 2003 decision, much to the frustration of Clear Channel.

“Radio has got a bad rap”, Andrew Levin of Clear Channel said following the announcement which retained local radio ownership limits which allows one company to own up to eight stations in a large city. Jonathan Adelstein, a Democrat Commissioner who opposed the change, described radio as a ‘harbinger’ of what would follow in television.⁸¹

⁷⁹ The 1996 Act opened the flood-gates to the current FCC changes. President Clinton and Vice-President Gore endorsed the legislation which, even by the current FCC Chairman’s reckoning, has reduced choice in the radio market. The issue of media ownership is often wrongly seen as partisan with the Republican Party being seen as the advocates of big business versus the Democrats defending the public interest. While the FCC June 2003 vote broke on straight partisan lines, and the Democrat Party is now running with it as an issue, the Clinton administration pushed deregulation and in the UK it has been a Labour Government which introduced the current Communications law and which was locked and amended by a motivated House of Lords.

⁸⁰ *USA Today*, survey and feature 16/1/2003 which was followed later by “Should limits on broadcast ownership change?”, 22/1/2003. *USA Today* ran two opinion pieces, one by the FCC chairman Michael Powell stating: “News commentary and public affairs programming, the fuel of our democratic society, are overflowing”. The other by Philip Meyer of the University of North Carolina stating: “We should remember that threats come not only from government; but they can come from big business too”.

⁸¹ *The New York Times*, 3/6/2003.

It is to the US that every other national state trying to balance public good and market freedom should look. Vaclav Havel, the author and former Czech leader, wrote “contemporary American is an almost symbolic concentration of all the best and the worst of our civilization,” committed to the noble ideals of its democracy but blindly following materialism and consumerism to its extremes.

For Europeans who have followed the free market philosophy of America through the post World War 2 era the legacy of corporate failures like Enron and the collapse of social goods, like diverse public news information, has to form part of that debate. A middle ground still exists between the common good and individual capitalism indeed for Americans that middle ground can be seen just up north – in Canada where a dynamic commercial media market is counter-balanced by a strong, well-funded public broadcasting network CBC which provides multi-cultural content and news funded by the exchequer.

Robert Putnam in his book on social capital, *Bowling Alone*, puts the mass media dominance and the narrowness of its messages at the heart of a breakdown in social activity.

Mass media allowed the citizen to be fully exploited as a consumer and to accelerate the concept of the consumer as the heart of US democracy. In fact buying power became as much a force as voting power in the new republic of consumerism.

5. Public broadcasting: The missing space in American media.

By the 1960s the debate over the impact of mass media on democracy and society led to President Lyndon Johnson establishing the Carnegie Commission on the Future of Public Broadcasting. The consumerist direction of TV, the rise of the civil rights disruption throughout the 1960s and the anti-Vietnam war protests led to a debate over information and society; about inclusion and power. The 1967 Carnegie report states, in echoes of Madison and Jefferson, that a “successful democracy depends on enlightened and well informed citizens”.

President Johnson said a new public broadcasting concept would “make our nation a replica of the old Greek marketplace where public affairs took place in view of all of the citizens”. Johnson went on in the Senate to underscore that line from Greece to Jefferson: “from our beginnings as a nation we have recognized that our security depends upon the enlightenment of the people, that our freedom depends on the communication of many ideas through many channels”. He added: “I am convinced that a vital and self-sufficient noncommercial system will not only instruct, but inspire and uplift our people”.

The US Constitution’s first Amendment was the result of the Madisonian debate over the protection of democracy; free speech, freedom of religious belief and a free press. But by the 1960s the power of TV and the marketplace was judged as needing federal intervention in order to protect that ideal of an informed public.

For those who believe a free media also means freedom from commercial domination it is somewhat ironic that the media conglomerates have used the First Amendment to defend and support media market liberalization, i.e. in that nothing should interfere with their freedom in the marketplace.

For the right to knowledge and information to have meaning a free press or media must be defined as not just free from state political interference but also from commercial monopolies. The Supreme Court in June 1945, in a case involving the Associated Press already voiced this: 'freedom of the press from governmental interference under the First Amendment does not sanction repression of that freedom by private interests'.

The Carnegie report was heavily influenced by Massachusetts, the birthplace of public broadcasting,⁸² in both its composition and inputs. Its chairman was James Killian President of MIT and James Conant of Harvard University and Ralph Lowell of Boston were also on the commission. Public television is largely defined as educational television by the commission and ironically while there were extremely well developed models of public broadcasting around the world the members, all male and all white, state baldly that "no such model" exists elsewhere and that the British, Japanese and European models would not fit the society and traditions of the US.

While no model could, or should, have been imported wholesale into the States, given the existing commercial nature of its market, some crucial lessons could have been taken from major public broadcasting companies like the BBC or even CBC in Canada closer to home. No attempt was made to create a bi-media public company and the lack of a significant not-for-profit newsgathering force is still an issue today.

The Carnegie Commission report and the later Kerner Commission report, on the civil rights riots in 1968, are laudable reactions from white upper middle class male elites to the civil revolution happening beneath them. But both are limited by lacking the very voices they hoped to represent.

⁸² Public radio projects started in Massachusetts.

The Carnegie reports see its goal to “seek an instrument for the free communications of ideas in a free society” and more fundamentally and revealingly “public television should help us know what it is to be many in one,” - to see the diversity of America hidden within *pluribus unum*.

“Public television” the report states as an aspiration which reflects the issues of the day “is capable of becoming the clearest expression of American diversity - of excellence within diversity”. Commercial TV had failed to reflect the grassroots and public TV was born out of a need to repair the damage.

The Kerner Report, on the civil rights riots, in 1968 later blamed the media and in particular TV for failing to report and reflect the growing civil divide in US society and for failing to reflect the needs, aspirations and views of African-Americans. A growing intellectual elite view of the late 1960s was that the marketplace was failing the public in terms of information and that the dominance of TV in the marketplace meant the center, i.e. government needed to act.

The difficulty was the elite view lacked the impact of the very people affected and as a consequence public television was seen more as a means of managing the tensions within a racial divided society rather than empowering the minorities.⁸³

Already by 1968 two thirds of Americans got their views primarily from TV. Public broadcasting TV (the 1967 report does not deal with radio at all) is born from this debate but the ideals of the Carnegie report are never fully realized in that the report sees the danger of creating a media dependent on politicians for approval and on the Congress for direct financial support.

⁸³ Laurie Ouellette, *Viewers like You?* (2002).

The report recommended a trust fund which could ensure, through accountability mechanisms, “a stable source of financial support” outside the world of commerce but over 25 years later the issues of independence and financial security continues to undermine the long-term success of the PBS mission. The trust aspect of the 1967 report was never implemented and the commission’s fear of political interference is realized in the assault on the PBS television and radio models under Presidents Nixon and Reagan.

Unlike Europe the arrival of public broadcasting or a not-for-profit concept of public broadcasting with defined social and political goals was a reaction to the marketplace and consumerism not a pre-requisite. In post World War Japan and Germany the need for an independent public broadcasting model ensured the development and support of NRK in Japan and Deute Welle’s mission as impartial, objective news sources.

Yet while the US had funded the development of public broadcasting in Japan as part of the creation and solidification of its democracy model no such debate took place in the States until the upheaval of the 1960s.

Frank Pace, the Democratic chairman of the board of the Corporation of Public Broadcasting,⁸⁴ called PBS the Marshall Plan of America in that it was seen as a means of extending the democratization of America at a time when politically and legislatively the democratic model was being renewed through the Civil Rights Act 1964 and the feminist and civil rights movements of the 1960s and early 1970s.

⁸⁴ Following the 1967 Act Congress created the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) to act as the fiscal agent for the US public broadcasting system. The CPB makes budget submissions to Congress and allocates them in turn to PBS, NPR, and Public Radio International (PRI) for production and operation costs. Nearly two thirds of CPB funds go directly to individual stations as ‘community service grants’.

Democracy is an evolving model. The democracy of the US created in 1790 excluded eighty percent of the citizens; only white, male, land-owners over twenty-one years were represented. The history of the States has been a continued conflict to extend that democracy, to all men, (regardless of status or class), then to all white women, and finally to all human beings regardless of race or gender over the age of eighteen. In future societies sixteen years may become the legal voting age and already democracy debates (Demos think tank in UK) are exploring how the rights of children are included in a functioning democracy.

In a model where only the elites voted, like eighteen century America, mass information was not a key issue. When the model is extended to all of society, regardless of education, gender, race or wealth, the role of mass information becomes central to the functioning of that society.

As rights extend so to must the mechanisms to support and protect those rights. Until the 1960s the US government did not believe the state had a role in information provision – by 1967 President Johnson had concluded that the marketplace had failed and intervention was necessary. As democracy evolves so too do the means by which you protect it.

The Carnegie report resulted in the Telecommunications Act of 1967, the creation of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the birth of PBS TV. By 1970 National Public Radio was born. Both organisations were devised separately with a complex system of federal and state funding.

In one key way the failure of the 1967 report to envisage the impact of a combined radio and television network, similar to the BBC, with the combined force of its newsgathering operations has created the present system where there is little cooperation between PBS TV and NPR, unless in some local franchises as in WGBH – Boston where there is a radio and TV wing, and little bi-media news gathering.

While NPR has flourish in its independent state and generally views PBS TV as a weak force any external analysis shows the strength of a co-ordinated newsgathering force particularly in foreign and international news where costs incurred independently for one operator can be punitive.

Laurie Ouellette, in her critique on PBS,⁸⁵ sees PBS as a failed mission which appeals to a white middle class elite rather than a broad and diverse America. PBS currently reaches about two percent of TV viewers and has lost ground in its news programming. Its presenters and content is equally seen as echoing an older Anglo-European world with its emphasis on BBC drama imports – “the Forsythe Syndrome,” as it might be called.

Although its documentary content, through the work of ground-breaking series like *Eyes on the Prize* by Judy Richardson in the early 1990s or Ken Burns’ encyclopaedia of work has given it a reputation for quality, they are often only small gems amid lots of imported or Americanised British shows like *Antique Roadshow* or British period drama which speaks to a very narrow range of Americans.

⁸⁵ Ouellette, *Viewers like You?* (2002)

If commercial and indeed public television in Europe sees its role as bringing in the best and sharpest American dramas, like *West Wing*, *E.R* and *The Sopranos*, public television imports a nostalgic view of British TV, favouring Morse re-runs and Sherlock Holmes dramas, leaving the more modern edge of shows like *Absolutely Fabulous* and *Graham Norton* to BBC's own channel *BBC America* which runs a more populist and contemporary version of British TV.

The chairman of the Carnegie Commission, James Killian, said: “the public TV system we visualize is not for the elite but for a broad cross section of the population. We are talking about a lot of specialized diversified interests. When you put them together you get a representative view of America”.

The ideal of a place where the new diverse American could meet and find common ground remained an ideal of both this commission and the later 1979 Carnegie Commission report on TV – but it remains an ideal largely unrealized in the reality of public broadcasting in the US today.

Its lack of a clear mission, boxed into educational rather than the Reithian broad church of the BBC⁸⁶, its lack of political and financial independence, its narrow appeal in the diverse and multi racial America of today has led to PBS's increasing irrelevant as a force within US.

The story for radio, ignored by the 1967 Carnegie report, is however more encouraging although for many observers NPR's “successes” in their audience, impact and information has come at a price of being increasingly dependent on commercial forces and influences.

⁸⁶ John Reith, (1889-1971), First Director General of the BBC, (1922-38), defined the BBC's mission, and it remains today as one which aims to ‘inform, education and entertain’. It created a broad concept of public broadcasting which was later defined as the mission to make ‘quality programmes popular and popular programmes of quality’.

National Public Radio was born in 1970 and began broadcasting in April 1971 with its mission statement describing itself as “the building block of democracy”.

The conflict between the conservative American and public broadcasting reached its peak, for TV, during the Nixon years when Nixon blocked PBS funding over its coverage of the Vietnam war while for radio the head on collision came during Newt Gingrich’s reign in the Senate in 1994.

Gingrich, a Republican and Leader of the Senate, attacked federal funds for both PBS and NPR saying it was the “communications wing of socialism”. He kicked off a new round of liberal bias in the media debates by saying: “We have Rush (Limbaugh) – we pay for Rush through advertising, they pay for NPR through our taxes”. The attack on NPR as a liberal medium was encapsulated in Pat Buchanan’s much quoted line that it was “the upholstered little playpen of our Chablis and brie set”.⁸⁷

The reaction from NPR was to protect its future by becoming more commercial and less dependent on federal funding. Today NPR states it receives less than one percent of its funding from federal funds and has instead grown its income from commercial sponsorship or “underwriting” as it likes to call this less direct form of sponsorship.

Time Magazine in its March 24 edition did a business feature which caught the new NPR with the headline ‘National Prosperous Radio’, saying the lack of competition in a deregulated radio market left NPR with more listeners and more non-government funds, through underwriting and charity trusts.

⁸⁷ Ironically Newt Gingrich is now a regular on NPR and says either he or it must have changed!

The tensions between a commercial and popular NPR and a non-commercial more alternative NPR are still felt in the radio network today. Neal Conan, today the presenter of *Talk of the Nation* the influential afternoon show, sums up the views of most still in NPR, “people talk about the golden days but they forget in the old days we had a few very good things but put an awful lot of crap on the air because we had nothing else”.

For others, like Garrison Keillor, the shift has meant a loss of edge. To Keillor, host and author of *Prairie Home Companion*, the daily current affairs show on NPR *All Things Considered* has become “soft”, while media analyst David Barsamian sees NPR as having become the voice of officialdom since its public battle with Gingrich.

For NPR, which has a clear mission to provide independent news according to its Executive Vice-President, Ken Stern, the fact that NPR now gets nearly as much criticism from the American left as the American right is healthy.⁸⁸ Stern sees himself as a CEO of a not-for-profit keen to expand NPR audiences and get revenue from whatever source he can.

While commercial funds to NPR are increasing the downside is it is now more susceptible to commercial pressures. WBUR, the Boston NPR station, has suffered an economic boycott by a pro-Israel American lobby which has cost the station about \$2 million a year, according to the station’s News Editor, Sam Fleming.⁸⁹ Kamera, the Zionist lobby group, claimed NPR, and in this case WBUR, is anti-Israel and has launched a long running campaign targeting commercial underwriters to the station.

⁸⁸ In interview with author, Washington, January 2003.

⁸⁹ In interview with author, Boston, December 17th 2002. “I can’t be affected by that, you just get on with it”.

WBUR insists the boycott, while financially painful, has had no impact on its news but the pressure on commercial funding without the security of government funds continues to put NPR in a challenging position.

Ironically despite the audience and commercials gains of NPR the left in the US has tended to see all commercialism as an evil. “We need a public broadcasting service that serves publics not markets”, Jerold Starr media activist writes and advocates for a coalition of public interests to push reform.⁹⁰ NPR, not surprisingly, sees this as a historic debate and states its goal to be a primary source of news and information with an ambitious target of thirty million listeners.

Across Europe most public broadcasters exist in a mixed economy of both public and commercial funds with an average ratio of one third commercial to public. The key to survival has been a clear legislative platform which defines the purpose of the broadcaster and allows it to maintain independence from both political and commercial masters.

Ken Stern says radio deregulation has actually been good for NPR, albeit bad for the consumer, in that with six chains broadcasting to forty-two of the radio audience, largely in music and commercial talk, no-one else is doing serious news and information. This, ironically, has allowed NPR to find its niche as primarily a news provider, rather than drama or arts, and ensure that all its future focus will be in news expansion.

⁹⁰ Starr, *Air Wars* (2000) chapter 10: “To accomplish this we need to form coalitions among public interest, educational, cultural, and other groups to press for basic structural reform of the present system”.

Time magazine, in a recent feature, talks of McRadio; radio with little local flavour, brief homogenised news and no event coverage.⁹¹ For NPR and Stern the lack of competition has confirmed the view that their future and success is in information and news.

Yet the Iraq war also highlighted the flaws in being an under-funded public broadcaster in that NPR, from day one, was extremely dependent on the BBC. for reportage and content. Additional hours of BBC World were pumped out and the tensions between funding and mission were highlighted by WBUR starting its spring fund-raising week in week one of the war. After protests from listeners the appeal, which meant the news editor was on-air on day one of the war breaking into coverage appealing for funds, was postponed.

NPR currently boasts the second and third most popular shows in the US with nearly twelve million listeners to *Morning Edition* compared to fifteen million for the conservative talk radio host Rush Limburgh, while NPR's evening news show, *All Things Considered* is a close third. The bad news though that while NPR's audiences are up – up 48% since 1998 -the overall poor quality of content on the commercial airwaves has driven audiences down.⁹² The percentage of Americans who listen to radio for at least minutes at any given time has fallen to 14.5% compared to 17.5% in 1989.

The McRadio dial has left people with less choice and less reason to listen.

⁹¹ *Time* 24/3/2003.

⁹² Mediabase 24/4 research shows Top 40s radio stations sound a lot like hip-hop, rhythm and blues stations because of overuse of playlists. *New York Times*, 17/3/2003.

6. Money, politics and television: the axis of influence.

The telecommunications industry is the fourth largest contributor to political campaigns and spent two hundred million dollars on lobbying in Washington in the year 2000 just behind finance, miscellaneous business and health industries.⁹³ The telecommunications industry as a lobby ensures that politicians remain wedded to the concept of unfettered deregulation and to the symbiotic relationship between party contributions and the financing of political campaigns. In all over \$1.4 billion dollars is spent in corporate lobbying a year.

The \$200 million spent by the corporations is there to protect their \$80 billion advertising market, its slice of the six trillion dollar US consumer market. Wall St calls it “the most powerful lobby” in Washington combining lobby power, with political contributions, and the added value that politicians want the media magnates and their influence on “their” side.

In the 2000 presidential election a record \$3 billion was spent on the presidential and congressional election campaigns with an addition \$1 million on state elections. Most of that money came from vested interests and went on campaign TV adverts; by the mid-term elections, in 2002, 80% of the \$1.2 billion spent went on television warfare or ‘negative campaigning’. Election 2000 marked a 50% increase over 1996 and the height of “soft” money contributions which rose to \$393 million that year.

Both Democrats and Republicans play the electoral finance system with Bill Clinton credited for opening the “soft” money slush funds and 2000 also saw a sharp up-swing in the multi-millionaire politicians with John Corzine, a New Jersey Senator ploughing \$60 million of his \$400 million wealth into his campaign.

⁹³ Opensecrets.org website, returns for 2000 provided some of the financial data in this chapter.

On average incumbents out-spent challengers nine times and not surprisingly tended to get elected. One of the most expensive campaigns was in New York where eighty million dollars was spent and Hilary Clinton was elected while George W Bush raised \$100 million himself in his 2000 campaign and he is currently targeting a million people for funds for his 2004 Presidential campaign.

For some, the debate over money and politics is reduced to an individual's right to spend as much as they want and can. *The Economist*, not known for its anti-market tendencies, stated baldly that it has to stop: "because it's bad for democracy", in an analysis written post the 2000 election⁹⁴. When you can buy your way into the chamber or congress, as the Economist put it, there is no incentive for the brightest and best to come forth.

While "soft" money in political contributions will be controlled by legislation introduced following these past mid-terms the limitless amounts a candidate or party can spend will ensure the escalating spend-fest of candidates like multi millionaire Corzine, or billionaire Michael Bloomberg, will continue.

At its heart a democracy is intended to be a meritocracy where honour and office is not based on family genes, the stamp of aristocracy, or family wealth, oligarchy. Controlling the influence of money in elections is one way of ensuring that merit is the deciding factor not dollars; 80% of all Senators are at least a millionaire. That may indicate they are all excellent capitalists but it hardly reflects the electorate or society.

⁹⁴ The Economist, "Selling America to the highest bidder". 9/11/2000. Economist in the Lexington column writes: "The Supreme Court does not help by (mistakenly) equating freedom of speech with freedom to spend money ad libitum on getting elected".

America is unique among market-led democracy in having such a close co-relation between wealth and power and only in Italy's Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi can you find a European billionaire politician – a media magnate – to rival US figures like New York's Governor Michael Bloomberg.

Bloomberg, who put up \$55 million of his own money into his successful \$100 million campaign to be elected, when challenged said: "What's a billionaire got to do with it? I mean would you rather elect a poor person who did not succeed? Look, I'm the American dream!".

Being rich therefore becomes a criterion for election, in standing for 'the American dream'. It is a criterion where success means money. It is a system where all politicians tend towards the center, and towards big business, in order to get elected.

But if being rich equals the 'dream' many in the electorate reject the connection between money and election. John Zogby, an independent, somewhat controversial pollster, points to a public dislike of "slush funds" and corporate money behind politics – particularly among the lower middle class and the working class.

A series of Zogby polls in 2001 shows 70% of the US public wanted electoral finance reform and supported Senator John McCain and later the Shays-Meehan legislation to stop 'soft' money. 87% said big business corporations had too much influence in politics and wanted reform. For Zogby, whose own politics are conservative, the issue remained one of public trust and confidence in the system.

If politicians wanted people to participate they needed to make people believe in the system. Polls equally show a public distaste for TV 'negative adverts' which creates a public view that all politics is corrupt and therefore why vote, why participate?

“Politics is the only industry that regularly and overwhelmingly denigrates its own products”, the Center for Voting & Democracy says and points out that as the amount of money spent on negative adverts increases the number of people voting declines. In the 2002 mid-term only thirty-nine percent of the electorate voted compared to seventy-five percent in the 2002 German elections. In the 2000 presidential election a record level of campaign money was spent but only half the electorate participated.

One billion dollars was spent, the highest in any mid-term election, in November 2002 and the 2004 elections is expected to reach another record-breaking high – with diminishing voters. The emphasis on wealth excludes candidates from the race and the only industry getting wealthy is commercial television – which spends millions ensuring that this source of political electoral money keeps flowing.

Tom Patterson, of Harvard University, in his study *The Vanishing Voter*,⁹⁵ shows that many citizens find the financing of politics and negative advertisements has eroded their confidence in the system. If millions are spent telling you Candidate A and Candidate B are vile people many in the voting public feel unable to vote.

The November 2002 mid-elections showed the widening gap between white and black participation in democracy and that, alarmingly, the number of African-American elected politicians has actually declined in the last ten years. In 2002 there was zero percentage increase in women elected and while there was a marginal overall increase of 1.7% in participation - in 40% of states voting actually declined.

Competition seemed to force the voters out, with the republican vote slightly up, but overall the trends for US democratic participation are the lowest of any functioning democracy with worrying gaps in economic class and race. Voting has dropped 20% since the 1960s with each four year cycle marking a new down-turn.

⁹⁵ Patterson, *The Vanishing Voter* (2002), an analysis of the 2000 Election.

Electoral reform is not complex. In most European democracies there are tight controls on how much candidates and parties can spend on elections, so that wealth can not be the determination of election and television space is often proved free for a limited number of broadcasts, mainly on the public broadcasting systems, to ensure free access and treatment for all political interests.

The real obstacle to reform in the US is the vested interests involved; the big businesses e.g. media empires who benefit from the current system and the fact that the current system favours the Republican Party in that spending does deliver results and the GOP is more likely, in all analyses, to get significant financial support from big business. One interesting development is that Howard Dean, the former Governor of Vermont and a Democratic Party hopeful for the Presidential race in 2004, announced in July 2003 that he had raised \$7.5 million dollars – half through the Internet and largely from advocacy websites which grew in significant through the internet anti-war campaign from January 2003.⁹⁶

The concept of balance and fairness, now parodied by Fox News, is at the heart of how society thinks its news media such behave. The Fairness Doctrine⁹⁷ had previously legally bound broadcasters to the concept of fairness and had gone some way to ensuring the even commercial broadcasters abided by “on the one hand and on the other hand” type political balance.

⁹⁶ MoveOn.org grew from Eli Pariser’s advocacy work. He is a New Yorker in his early twenties who grew the anti-war movement behind the February 15th rallies and following the war turned the site into a political campaign to support a candidate most likely to oust President Bush. MoveOn.org now claims hundred of thousands of subscribers and it nominated Dean following a poll of the candidates and its subscribers. Once Dean was nominated subscribers have been asked to put money and time into the campaign. Much of Dean’s money has come from thousands of small personal donations.

⁹⁷ The Fairness Doctrine, 1949, required broadcasters to be nonpartisan, to give air-time to controversial news and public affairs and to provide reasonable opportunities for the presentation of contrasting viewpoints. It strengthened the ‘public interest’ clauses of the Communications Act, 1934, where broadcasters had to meet general public interest and equal time requirements.

The Fairness Doctrine was abolished, following media industry challenges, by President Ronald Reagan in 1987 on the basis that he termed it “interference” in the commercial market and the cable market development had made it irrelevant.

Broadcasters had challenged the Fairness Doctrine under the First Amendment but the FCC’s policy was upheld by the Supreme Court in *Red Lion Broadcasting v. FCC* (1969): “It is the purpose of the First Amendment to preserve an uninhibited marketplace of ideas in which truth will ultimately prevail, rather than to countenance monopolization of that market, whether it be by the Government itself or a private licensee”.

The removal of the Fairness Doctrine marked a watershed in U.S broadcasting. Many analysts note marked changes following the removal of news requirements on TV companies by the FCC in 1983, the removal of the Fairness Doctrine in 1987, and the Telecommunications Act 1996 which deregulated the radio industry and relaxed some of the controls on media ownership.⁹⁸ The FCC’s 2003 decision has completed the process of stripping the electronic space of public obligation despite the fact the airwaves remain a public resource.

The abolition of the Fairness Doctrine allowed the TV industry to treat news as entertainment, a gladiator sport and foreign news was increased replaced by crime and celebrity stories in the news agenda. Without any legal ‘fairness’ requirement there is no check against a broadcaster for balance or accuracy except the defamation laws. Unlike many democracies; the UK for example, where legal regulations govern political and news balance on both commercial and public broadcasting, the US makes no attempt to set controls on balance, fairness, or equity, beyond the defamation laws, in how the broadcasting airways are used.

⁹⁸ Gunter/Mughan: 2000, pg 12-14.

Some argue that this is the true manifestation of the first Amendment, of free speech, but in practice it allows TV companies to use news any which way they choose to attract audiences.

In the UK Independent Television News (ITN) the commercial national news provider is legally bound to be balanced and during elections it faces the same controls and monitoring as the public broadcaster, the BBC. The rationale remains that the airways are a public entity, limited in spectrum and ability, and as such carry more responsibilities than print news.

One of the observations made by Gunther and Mughan is that in most countries observed where there is a strong public broadcasting ethos, across Western Europe, Japan and Australia, the news content and quality of in those countries is high.⁹⁹ The standards set by the BBC type models appear to spread to commercial rivals in that public sector model frequently has higher journalistic norms than in countries without a strong public broadcasting ethos.¹⁰⁰

One negative example would be Italy where the current Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, not only controls the commercial TV networks but as PM exercises undue control over the public broadcasting system¹⁰¹. Berlusconi is about the only European example of a multi-millionaire businessman cum political leader similar to an American-style politician.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Gunther/Mughan (2000). pg 439, chap 12 "The Political Impact of the Media".

¹⁰⁰ Michael Grade, former CEO of Channel 4, a commercial station with public obligations in the UK, said: "The BBC keeps us all honest", quoted in Richard Hoggart's essay on the UK Communications Bill "This is as dumb as it gets", *The Guardian* 4/6/2003.

¹⁰¹ RAI's authority and management has suffered from direct political interference.

¹⁰² Silvio Berlusconi is Italy's richest man, with a personal fortune of over \$15 billion. He owns 48% of Mediaset, the main commercial broadcasting company, and as Prime Minister he also indirectly controls Italy's public broadcaster RAI. Berlusconi faced fraud charges in 2003 relating to Mediaset and is accused, in Italy, of trying to undermine RAI in order to boost the interests of Mediaset's three TV channels, Canale 5, Italia 1 and RETE 4.

But even in Italy, with those tensions, there is still a very high news and international news content. Japan, Britain and Germany all practice what is called ‘impartiality models’ where their public sector systems are legally obliged to be impartial and in these countries the highest standards are found as other broadcasters and news out-lets have quite a clear margin to judge themselves by. In all big public sector countries there is a high level of home produced content in news and a high value put on an independent national voice.

In a comparison of developed free market democracies the US alone allows a wholesale commercialisation of elections – and it has the lowest level of participation. In most other compared societies the amount spent on elections and how the campaigns are run in the broadcasting media is clearly controlled to ensure the public hears all sides. In most situations TV and radio advertisement is provided free, usually on the public broadcasting system, but in some cases both commercial and not commercial are required to provide public information adverts on behalf of political parties.

A clear emphasis in most societies is put on both protecting the public from media manipulation during elections and on ensuring the electorate is given an opportunity to be informed before voting. In the US this distortion of politics and commerce is disenfranchising the public and has created a misinformed, confused and indeed apathetic citizenship. Jefferson’s ‘enlightened democracy’ ideal has been replaced by advertisement dollars.

7. Foreign policy and silent voices: McMedia at war.

A media landscape dominated by hyper-commercial interests, in a society with a weak and under resourced public broadcasting system, and has contributed to political apathy. It has also made it quite difficult for the US people to negotiate a period of international conflict since the tools of information are frequently absent.

The move, since the late 1980s, by the main network news stations to drop foreign news and target audiences through more sensational domestic stories, like crime, particularly celebrity crime, is well documented.

Joseph Nye, Dean of the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, in his book *The Paradox of Power*, talks of a move, post 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union, to close foreign bureaus and cut international coverage by two-thirds.

The President of MSNBC, the joint venture of two global giants Microsoft and GE's NBC, blamed 'a national fog of materialism and disinterest and avoidance' for pulling back on foreign news and focusing on lifestyles.¹⁰³ Yet a year later MSNBC would be re-vamping to inject 'Hollywood style showmanship' into the network to compete with Fox News and dropping serious content.¹⁰⁴

In a period when the US moved into solo power status, the commercial instincts of the industry were maximize revenues while the public broadcasting sector was being rapidly weaned off federal funds and becoming dependant on commercial money. While NPR continued to cover the world increasingly the BBC, in its NPR relays, came to represent foreign news for American radio listeners.

¹⁰³ Jim Rutenberg, "Networks Move to Revive Foreign News", *New York Times*, 24/9/01

¹⁰⁴ Jim Rutenberg, *New York Times* "NBC's Cable Network, Beaten up by Fox, Looks for New Personality", 9/12/2003 C11. "Its research is showing that the cable news audiences want something that is anathema to its old-line news organisation, namely – attitude, a strong point of view and a good dose of Hollywood-style showmanship'.

The Gulf War of 1991 is said to have “made” CNN and twenty four hour continuous news was created. In the UK Murdoch’s Sky News also made it mark during the Gulf War and by the mid 1990s a host of new 24 TV stations, including public broadcasting models like BBC News 24, were launched. In the US Fox News was born while in the Middle East Al-jazeera, was launched¹⁰⁵. By the time the 2003 Iraq war occurred global 24/7 TV news channels were ready to capitalize on a ready source of “continuous” news.

For audiences without context, i.e. an understanding of the issues involved, war becomes a video experience; flashing lights and not much humanitarian impact. Peaks of emotional engagement through TV news in the US are seen when the US military is in Somalia and former Yugoslavia but the financial commitments made to foreign coverage remained a low priority for the networks and the media groups.

In the wake of the 9/11 attacks in the US there was a short lived flurry of interest in what was the story behind the attack. The clichéd question; “why do they hate us?” saw a brief interest in books, publications and information relating to the Arab world and Islam in particular. News organizations increased their world vision and for a brief period, according to the Pew Press research, the news media was perceived very positively by the public.

¹⁰⁵ Al-Jazeera, which broadcasts from Qatar, grew out of a Saudi and BBC project to develop an Arab language TV service similar to the BBC Arabic radio network. The BBC’s desire for editorial independence apparently broke the deal with the Saudi investors. The 20 plus BBC trained staff moved to Qatar and from late 1996 received backing from the emir of Qatar. The emir invests about \$100 a million to sustain the station. Today Al-Jazeera has a staff of 350 and an audience of approx 35 million. It gained Arabic eyes with its coverage of the Palestinian *intifada* but it was its transmission of the Osama Bin Laden, carried worldwide by CNN, which made it internationally known. Its coverage of the Iraq war ensured its footage was carried on every English language news channel including Fox News in the States – since no US crews remained in Baghdad after the CNN crew was ejected by the Iraqis at the end of week one.

However by January and the end of the Afghanistan war it was clear the media priorities were not only returned to business as normal but that the level of debate and challenge happening within the media on both domestic and foreign policy relating to the “war on terror” was low.

The horrors of 9/11 and a sense of the reality of President Bush’s “either for us or against us” speech had created a consensus of patriotism where questions, doubts, issues, even facts were carefully avoided on the basis as one senior editor, Jodie T. Allen of *US News and Report*, said, in a discussion at Harvard University, “for fear of being seen as anti-patriotic”.¹⁰⁶

The trends leading up to the Iraq war ensured that TV coverage of the dissent movement against military action in Iraq was not visible before the mid February 2003 major rallies and any coverage of dissent ceased once the military campaign began in March.

The alignment of the broadcast commercial media with the Bush administration was highlighted by CNN's anchor Paula Zahn, in February 2003 when she opened her interview with Jamie Rubin, former State Department spokesperson, on the Iraqi response to Secretary of State Powell's UN speech by saying: "You've got to understand that most Americans watching this were either probably laughing out loud or got sick to their stomach. Which was it for you?"¹⁰⁷

The idea of objective and balanced journalism, where the anchors should seek rather than give opinions, was now alien to the cable news environment where the more opinionated and angled you are, as an anchor or reporter, the quicker your route to ratings, fame, money and career success.

¹⁰⁶ Allen, assistant managing editor, was addressing a ‘brown bag’ lunch at the Shorenstein Center, 29/10/ 2002 and made the comment in reply to a question from the author.

¹⁰⁷ Another Zahnism from the war: in a pick up from a TV report on a pro-war rally at the Ground Zero site she turned to camera and said, “Well if that rendition of The Star Spangled Banner doesn’t move you, I don’t know what will!”

Ms Zahn was an anchor star, for CNN America, during the war and was rewarded with her own show after the military campaign. In mid April as the administration turned its attention on Syria, threatening military attack just days after taking Baghdad, Ms Zahn's only response to her military expert in studio was "what I can't understand is why Syria and not Iran?"

The role of the US media, its coverage of international policy, and the often obsequious manner in which it covered the Bush administration during this period highlights the need to re-awaken a Madisonian debate over the connection between an enlighten democracy and information. The growing commercial concentration of the US media, where six major players control the bulk of all media, and the lack of strong, securely funded public broadcasting news network has left the US public ill prepared or informed for the foreign policy debates and decisions facing it.

With the FCC's decision to lift ownership controls on the commercial media marketplace and with PBS television facing heightened financial and commercial pressures US citizens seeking alternative sources of news information are increasingly forced to go to overseas broadcasters like the BBC or European press like *The Guardian*, *Financial Times*, and *Le Monde*.

By late February 2003 a citizen's information lobby group highlighted this by taking out full pages adverts in the US press advertising the U.K. newspapers *The Guardian* and *The Observer* as sources of alternative and critical news. None of these sources are by themselves ideals of balance but what the US media marketplace is increasingly reflecting is the interests of big business and the political interests that support those businesses. For the public the alternatives are more often than not internet sites which again highlight the lack of debate in the mainstream media.

Post the Iraq war while cable news providers like Fox showed a 300% increase in audiences other trends were that American audiences for the BBC and the Guardian were significantly up. BBC showed a 28% increase in TV audiences in its relays on PBS, and on *BBC America*, its commercial channel in the US and now plans to launch its full news channel *BBC World* on cable. Internet hits for both the BBC online sites and *The Guardian* also grew in the US showing increasing audiences seeking their diversity from outside sources.

The view that US TV channels took was that once the war started the appropriate way to cover was by “supporting” the troops¹⁰⁸. Most American TV news, bar PBS, described the US troops as “ours” while the ‘embedded’ reporters for Fox News frequently saw themselves as part of the combat unit.¹⁰⁹ Indeed Fox News used Oliver North, the disgraced military colonel, of *Contragate* fame, as an ‘embedded’ reporter. The widening gulf between the war as experienced by Arab and American viewers was highlighted in *The New York Times* with a piece contrasting how the Arab press covered the war titled “The War Americans Don’t See”.¹¹⁰ A war, which was daily labeled “Operation Iraqi Freedom” by Fox News on screen was increasingly seen in quite a different light on Arab television, particularly Al Jazeera, whose influence grew throughout the war.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ Media analysis on Iraq war coverage is based on author’s presentation ‘The Media at War’, at the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, Harvard, 27/4/2003.

¹⁰⁹ Fox News ‘embedded’ reporter, Greg Kelly coming into Baghdad with the US Army saying ‘we have destroyed several Iraqi battalions’ on live video link.

¹¹⁰ The piece looked at how images of “dead and maimed Iraqi children” dominated Arab media, Rami Khouri, *New York Times* 4/4/2003. The previous day the paper’s war supplement “A Nation at War” carried a front page report on “Arab media portray war as killing field”.

¹¹¹ See New York Times magazine feature “The Arab TV Wars”, by Daoud Kuttub. He points out that Al Jazeera succeed because it does not toe the party line of national networks in the Arab world and will juxtaposition government spokesperson with antigovernment.

CBS's Andrew Heyward, speaking about the media in the run-up to the war, dismissed the need for objective journalism when a country is at war.¹¹² "I'm rooting for the US to win; I'm an American citizen first," he said adding that he had no interest in objective journalism if it meant not wanting America to win. Dan Rather, the CBS anchor said something similar in an interview with CNN's Larry King.

Ironically the very time a nation needs an objective news source is when it is at war. The BBC went to battle with the then British Government during the Falklands War in 1981 over the broadcaster use of the words "the British Forces" rather than "our forces".

The current BBC Director General, Greg Dyke, during the Iraq war, highlighted this difference and said it was the broadcaster's duty to ensure, despite the interests of its own government and citizens, that news remained impartial during conflict¹¹³.

The price of such a stand became evident by June 2003 when the British Government launched a highly personal attack on a BBC correspondent and claimed the BBC had been biased against the war.¹¹⁴ The clash of wills between the Government and broadcaster was sparked by the BBC highlighting gaps in the so called "dodgy" dossier which the Government presented to the Commons to justify war. The BBC's Director of News, Richard Sambrook, accused the Government of having "put pressure" on public broadcaster during the war.

¹¹² Andrew Heyward, President of CBS News, addressed the Shorenstein Center, Harvard, 17/10/2002 on "Trends in Television News and why You Should Care". His address was carried on CSPAN and his comments were in response to questions from the audience.

¹¹³ Dyke, speaking to Harvard Business School, 2/4/2003. Reported in *Harbus* 7/4/2003 "BBC Brass Bashes War Coverage Biases".

¹¹⁴ The Government-BBC war resulted in the tragic suicide on July 17th of David Kelly, the Ministry of Defence scientist who was the source for the BBC report by Andrew Gilligan.

Interestingly, when CBS and Dan Rather landed the exclusive interview with Saddam Hussein, on 24/2/2002, CBS found them at odds with the White House who echoed President Eisenhower view in 1957 that it was somehow “unpatriotic” to interview the enemy.

The White House demanded its spokesperson Ari Fleisher should get a right of reply. CBS and Heywood refused and stood their ground perhaps realizing that in a time of conflict the only place for a news organization is on the side of information. Despite this stand however the approach of TV news in the US differed sharply from the BBC in that once war began uncomfortable questions were dropped.

At the heart of this debate, that the news broadcaster has duties to the public good is the viewpoint most clearly put forward by Cass Sunstein in his study *Republic.com* that citizens and consumers are not the same thing. Consumers often demand short-term gains for short-term needs, while a concept of the public good requires a vision beyond the individual and the here and now.

The environment is a good example. Short-term consumer needs, i.e. plastic bags can have long-term consequences – which require the public good to mediate. In Ireland a levy was put on the use of the bag which has now largely eradicated the use of plastic bags from daily shopping.

If all news media is commercialized to the extent that its audiences is solely seen as consumers to sell advertisement to then it debases the concept of a balanced objective news source which supports a strong civic society.

Within the European tradition the concept of the public broadcaster was, and is, defended on the basis that the marketplace does not provide all social goods and that information is too important a social good to be defined solely on commercial and mass consumer needs.

Within mixed economics a securely funded public broadcaster ideally offers a non commercial viewpoint within the often highly fragmented media market. In the US the network news and cable channels reflect competition over audiences over segments of desired consumers.

8. The right to know: the debate starts here.

“A better informed political debate is the only way for our people to determine how broadly or narrowly to define our interests”, Joe Nye writes in *The Paradox of Power*. Nye looks at the BBC as being, to use his terminology, the best form of ‘soft’ power Britain possesses. It is the independence and credibility that the BBC has as a brand which works, not the concept that is “selling” or promoting British ideology.

The protection of an independent public sector media is one way for a democracy to ensure that information; news and knowledge, is not solely defined on a commercial and profit basis. It is quite different to the forms of ‘public diplomacy’ used by US International Broadcasting Bureau. The US government is now putting millions into in order to persuade an increasingly hostile Muslim world to love America, like Radio Sawa or Farda, or the planned US Arab TV service which is intended to counter the influence of Al-Jazeera.¹¹⁵

The gap between ‘public diplomacy’ and propaganda is credibility¹¹⁶. The gap between Voice of America or Radio Sawa and the BBC World Service is equally credibility. One has a purpose of promoting a country, i.e. the State department editorials on VOA, while the other (although paid for by the state) sees its function to provide accurate and balanced information.¹¹⁷ BBC’s Greg Dyke, speaking in April 2003 during the Iraq war, said “we (news broadcasters) are nothing without trust”.

¹¹⁵ Radio Sawa, replaced the VOA’s Arabic Service with a more youth-orientated music station, and was launched in the Autumn of 2002, while Radio Farda broadcasts into Iran with a slightly more adult speech format. The US Arab TV service is expected to launch before the end of 2003.

¹¹⁶ Kim Andrew Elliott, an analyst with the US International Broadcasting Bureau wrote in the New York Times November 2002 argued that straight reporting was the best way to promote the US. The BBC World Service’s strength and reputation he said came from its independence.

¹¹⁷ Two of the three principles in the VOA charter call upon the service to present US policies and project ‘American thought and institutions’ abroad while its first principle is to be an ‘accurate, objective and comprehensive’ source of news. The tensions in the mission statement are reflected in the creation of Sawa and Farda and the closing of the Arabic and Farsi services.

The public needs to trust its sources of information – or else it sees news as just another stream of propaganda – someone else's truths. It needs to have the tools to understand and filter bias, to know what the basis of an opinion is, what facts exist to support it.

For the media conglomerates the objective is, rightly, to make money. The checks and balances have to come from a society which views information as a public good and which is determined to ensure it protects that good. The balance must be a healthy marketplace side by side with secure and independent not for profit elements within the media so that a diversity of news is available. A marketplace, through media consolidation, which delivers a monopoly, is not in the public's interest and a soft but firm hand in regulation is required.

The link between a functioning democracy and information is related in Article 19 of the UN Human Rights Charter of 1948. It echoes the concept of the US Constitutional's first Amendment in defining freedom of speech as a basic human right. For the EU, and its proposed new constitution, the concept of media freedom has involved a debate over public and private, and the limits to information and the freedom of opinions in that it involves defining when some opinions i.e. hate crimes, invocation of racism and racist behaviour, are not permissible.

Since Socrates, the debate over dangerous opinions has raged and censorship remains a challenging social debate over conflicting rights and what is perceived as the common good. But what needs to be defined is how we give flesh to the ideal of a public right to knowledge and information and how rights based democracies societies should achieve it.

“Freedom of speech is a farce”, Hannah Arendt wrote, “unless factual information is guaranteed”. To guarantee factual information democratic societies need to ensure the concept of a free and independent media; independent not just from political interference but also from commercial dominance. That requires a reflection of control which minds the public good of information and protects it, particularly in a time of conflict or war.

In the US a range of associated principles would support a public right to information. Implementation of controls on electoral campaign spending with the introduction of free and limited airtime to candidates supervised on the Federal Elections Commission (FEC). These controls could remove the billion dollar price tag from US elections, reduce the commercial pressure on information in democracy, and ensure a more equitable and participatory system. It would, as a side produce, reduce the need for massive political funds and reduce the influence of wealthy lobby groups and corporate business on politics.

American public broadcasting needs to be provided with a sustainable future, secure funding and political independence married with clear goals and accountability.

Extending the dependency on commercial funding may seem like a way to reduce political vulnerability but it is a high price tag. Ultimately structures are needed to ensure all branches of public broadcasting work together to provide a public mission and that public fund is provided to ensure real information diversity.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ Smith, chapter 35: 2002 proposes the establishment of a trust fund to safeguard non commercial TV from commercial and political interests.

Restrictions on cross-ownership and specific controls on the ownership of a multiplicity of news outlets across different media are needed in order to encourage media diversity. This goes hand in hand with a re-opening of the debate on a fairness legislation drafted to reflect an obligation on all broadcasters to be fair and balanced in their news and current affairs output.

The current push to have a “liberal” radio station to “take on” Rush Limbaugh misses the point that a fairness principle, or a strong, securely funded, independent public broadcaster would protect the interests of society and the public far more.¹¹⁹ A BBC style radio/television network, with joint news-gathering, would ensure more accurate news and better citizenship without further altering the news media landscape into a partisan zone where audiences only hear the views and opinions which reflect their own. Dewey’s view that no man or mind can be emancipated alone shows the dangers of a news fragmented media environment where one can happily exist without ever encountering an opposing or challenging idea.

The concept of a public right to know, as suggested by Article 19 of the UN Charter, should be protected by strengthening the concept that the media, in particular the news media, has obligations above and beyond fiction based media like cinema. The abstract of that right needs to be debated and defined in legislation and regulation so that the nature of the connection between popular democracy and public information is underscored.

Just as we expect that food manufacturers should tell us everything about what we are eating, and declare it on the package, so should news media declare their interests and influences.

¹¹⁹ *The Guardian*, ‘Radio station to give American liberals a voice’ by Duncan Campbell, 19/2/2003. Venture capitalists in Chicago are behind a radio project with a projected budget of \$200million intended to create a liberal agenda talk radio station.

The New York Times editorial on the day of the FCC decision was the first time the newspaper told its readers that the NYT as a business had lobbied for change.

Gaps in the information markets need to be filled by encouraging diversity and promoting some aspect of not for profit news gathering in any society; whether a form of public broadcasting or not for profit media groups. Both *The Guardian* newspaper in the UK and *The Irish Times* in Ireland, for example, are trust based newspapers which provide a counter-balance to the global media group newspapers such as *The Times* which is part of the Murdoch Empire or *The Irish Independent* which is part of Tony O'Reilly's Independent Group – now a major international media chain.

The social impact of an informed citizenship is in the interests of everyone in the long-term. Just like the plastic bags and green levy. The connections between information and democracy, i.e. the role that news plays in supporting or undermining our political system, needs to be part of our civic education in schools, knitted into our building of a civic consciousness, and part of how we teach and train journalists and media managers. The profit margin is not damaged by producing good quality products and an educated and informed industry, aware of its role, can benefit everyone. The entrepreneurial ambitions of any media group can be achieved by also co-existing within a legal framework of rights and responsibilities. Quality news and factual programming will ultimately grow audiences.

A rights based democracy needs an accountable and transparent news media. It needs forms of not-for-profit news, both public broadcasting and newspapers, and it needs an environment in which these forms can flourish side by side by solely commercial products. Public broadcasting, in any society, needs to be accountable for public funds, but it equally needs to have the freedom to be popular and not marginal or elitist. It needs to be part of the daily experience of people.

Choice, real choice, is about diverse options and the US, despite its mass market and array of choices, lacks the diversity which a stronger public broadcasting model, particularly in TV, could provide. Americans should not need to get their foreign affairs news from the BBC, which is the case for many people today as it was highlighted during the Iraq war.¹²⁰

An understanding that information creates stronger political structures and voting citizens ensures that, like education, it is an investment for the future. If Nye sees the BBC as 'soft power' for the British it is the form of soft power which the US lack and which millions spent on partisan Arab radio or television projects, like Radio Sawa, will not provide.¹²¹

The stark commercialism of the US market is a trend facing all other marketplace. The UK Government's communications legislation reflects the US view that deregulation must be a good thing.

The reaction of the House of Commons, in February 2003, that diversity in radio was a public good reflects the need to learn from the American experience where radio deregulation has led to radio homogeneity, less choice in music and less news¹²².

¹²⁰ *BusinessWeek* 28/4/2003 "Suddenly the BBC is a world-beater": "The US may have won the war in Iraq, but when it comes to the battle of the airwaves victory belong to the British Broadcasting Corp." *BusinessWeek* credited the BBC's success in taking viewers from CNN and Fox News because it challenged the "unrelenting" pro US line of the American broadcasters.

¹²¹ Peter Peterson in his essay, "Public Diplomacy and the War on Terrorism", *Foreign Policy*, Sept 2002 provides a counter argument in that Peterson articulates current policy of pro-US Arab services and proposes a Corporation for Public Diplomacy.

¹²² *MediaGuardian.co.uk* 26/2/2003. Local radio changes 'undermine diversity'. Leading musicians and 15 of the UK's music industry bodies lobbied MPs in the House of Commons with the result that MPs from both sides of the House came together to argue that the proposed Communications Bill could stifle diversity on radio. While the bill passed through the House of Commons it was held up in the House of Lords which forced amendments in the bill to protect media plurality and public interest.

The extremities of the U.S experience, particularly during the Iraq war where Clear Channel's control of commercial radio ensured that dissenting voices and musicians were kept off the airwaves, as the Dixie Chicks row showed,¹²³ has acted as a warning flag to other western democracies that this is more than an issue of liberalizing markets.

The issue today for all of us who want to see a realization of a rights based democratic society is that some rights and freedoms need to be protected in order to even begin building a democracy. Ignorance, silence and denial have given mankind genocide, crimes against humanity and fascism. Information, as Jefferson said, can alone make us safe, communication, as Madison put it, protects all other rights.

In the States the FCC decision has at least motivated a debate. By July 8th the FCC Democratic Commissioners claimed some two million people have contacted the FCC to protest against the decision and the debate has moved to Congress where it is gathering political force.

The irony is that the deregulation decision of June 2nd 2003 may prove to be the wake up call for action which may allow the debate on information and democracy to take place.

In an era when, through technological advances, we can finally realize the concept of universal information we need to recognize that an ultra-capitalist marketplace does not ensure that right to information any more than a totalitarian regime. Capitalism is not in itself the equivalent of democracy and democracy requires more than a free market to flourish.

¹²³ Natalie Maines, the Dixie Chicks leader singer, said she was 'ashamed' the President came from Texas, her home state, and expressed her opposition to the war at concert in London on March 10th. Afterwards many American radio stations, part of Clear Channel chain, stopped playing her music. According to Mediabase, a radio airplay research company, there was a 20% reduction in airtime for the Dixie Chicks. *New York Times*, 24/3/2003.

The human right to knowledge, information and understanding and how we enshrine, define and protect that right, needs to be at the top of both our national and international agenda if humanity is to realize its full potential and move beyond the reductionist age of McMedia.

The Age of McMedia: Appendix 1.

End notes:

*Sources for much of the contemporary news material come from *The Economist*, *BusinessWeek*, the *Financial Times*, *The Guardian* and the *New York Times* since these publications provide detailed coverage of the international media industry.

*useful websites include the above media sites and the following;

OpenSecrets.org – a site dedicated to politics and funding

OpenDemocracy.org – a discussion and debate site on issues relating to democracy

FAIR.org – a media monitoring site which tracks balance, accuracy issues in media

mediachannel.org – an alternative news and media site

The Pew Research Center for Press and Public Policy provides media research on its site pew-press.org

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The Age of McMedia: diagrams and charts

Filling the Airwaves

Clear Channel is by far the nation's dominant broadcaster, based on the number of radio stations and weekly audience.

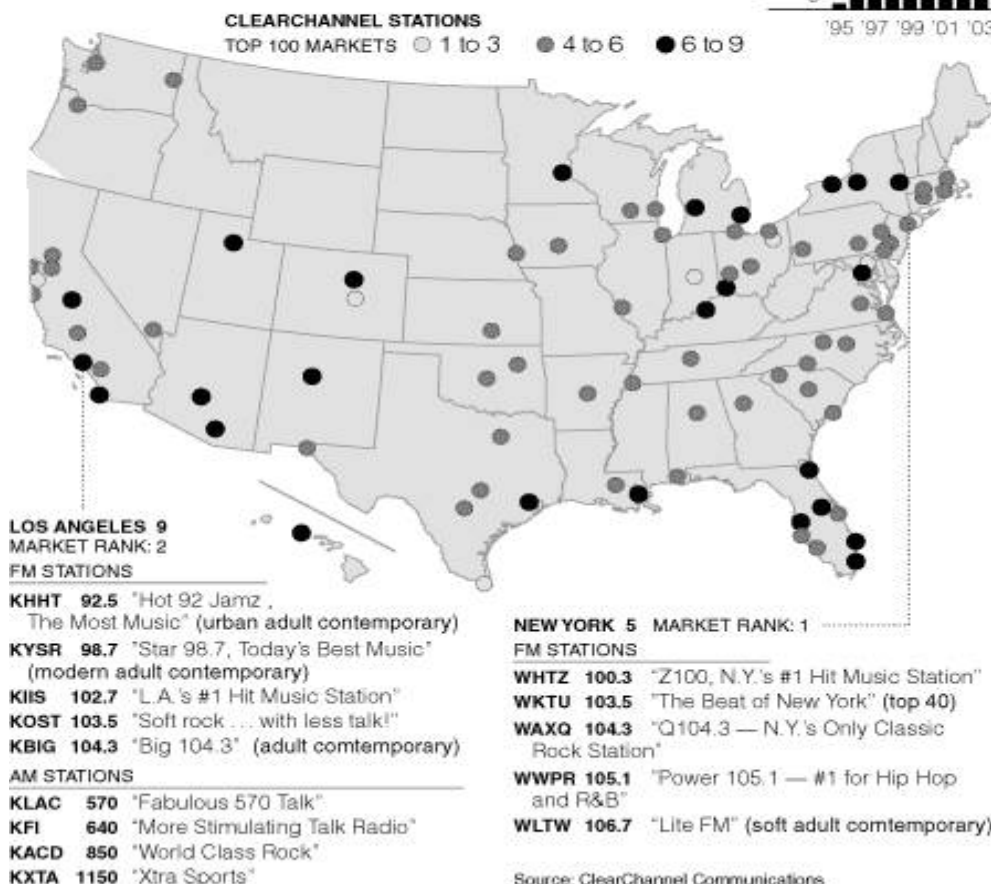
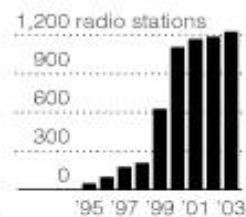
COMPANY	RADIO STATIONS*	WEEKLY AUDIENCE, MILLIONS*
Clear Channel	1,214	104.6
Infinity	183	61.1
Walt Disney	63	13.7
Cox	75	13.0
Entercom	100	12.5
Radio One	62	11.1
Emmis	21	10.8
Citadel	205	10.5
Hispanic	55	8.6
Bonneville	20	7.2

*Figures as of mid-2002.

Source: Deutsche Bank

Radio Power

Clear Channel, which has grown rapidly into the nation's largest radio broadcaster, is particularly formidable in the biggest markets, where it often owns multiple stations. Of the more than 1,200 stations the company owns, 485 are within the 100 largest markets.



Source: ClearChannel Communications

