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American Mass Media and the Myth of Libertarianism: Toward an “Elite Power Group” Theory

Roya Akhavan-Majid and Gary Wolf

This paper presents evidence of the demise of Libertarianism in the U.S. mass media system and proposes an “elite power group” model as an alternative explanation of the workings of the mass media in the United States. In sharp contrast to the structural characteristics implied by the Libertarian model, the U.S. media industry is organized as an elite power group characterized by (a) growing concentration and conglomeration, (b) integration with other power elites, and (c) ability to exercise self-serving control on the government even as it is controlled by it.

As a press model characterized by diversity of media units, independence from vested elite interests, and freedom from government control, Libertarianism is the ideal that often inspires journalists as well as the standard against which mass media performance is often judged by critics. But aside from providing a normative ideal, the Libertarian model is also considered to *describe* the current mass media system in the United States. This lingering assumption, reflected in scholarly and professional circles, is somewhat surprising given the increased attention to the media’s deviation from that ideal.

Beginning with the Hutchins Commission’s report on the freedom of the press (Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1947), the last few decades have seen a growing criticism of the American mass media, particularly with respect to the increasing concentration and conglomeration of ownership and the subordination of the ideals of diversity and independence to the corporate search for synergy and profits. Yet, ultimately, this criticism has treated the media’s deviations from the Libertarian ideal as anomalies, as pathological occurrences within an essentially Libertarian system. However, far from reflecting mere deviations, these anomalies reflect a structural shift within the U.S. media system, a system for which Libertarianism has lost its descriptive and explanatory power.

American Mass Media and the Theories of the Press

Outside of Marxist circles, the typology developed by Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm in *Four Theories of the Press* (1956) has dominated how scholars classify mass media systems. In this typology, Libertarianism and Authoritarianism represent the overarching theories, while the Social Responsibility and Soviet Communist models are treated as their respective variants.

The Authoritarian and Libertarian theories differ fundamentally in their views of the nature of the government, truth, and human beings. Authoritarianism sees the governing elites as

inherently good and wise, while the masses are considered to be ignorant and incapable of independently discerning the truth. The primary role of the press in an authoritarian society thus is to convey the government's version of the truth to the masses and to protect society from harmful ideas that might threaten its orderly and harmonious existence. Libertarianism, in contrast, views human beings as rational and capable of discovering the truth if allowed to participate in a free marketplace of ideas. There is no special faith placed in the government under Libertarianism. As a partner of the people in the search for the truth, the press is required to function as a watchdog of the government and to keep the citizens informed of the actions of their elected representatives.

As a modification of the Libertarian theory, the Social Responsibility theory holds that, because media ownership is heavily concentrated and because not everyone is able to own a press, it is the responsibility of journalists and media professionals to allow the expression of diverse opinions and to ensure that whoever has something to say has an opportunity to say it.

Like Authoritarianism, the Soviet Communist model operates on the basis of central authority, but it also allows for *systematic* use of the media by the state to achieve specific social and political goals.

In the first revision of the four theories typology in 1971, Lowenstein (Merrill & Lowenstein, 1979; Mundt, 1991) maintained the Authoritarian and Libertarian philosophies as originally proposed. Soviet Communist, however, became "Social Centralist", a broader concept intended to describe the collectivist orientation and centrally guided nature of the press in the developing as well as the Communist countries. Social Responsibility, on the other hand, became "Social Libertarian" in an attempt to underscore the close relationship between the Social Responsibility and Libertarian theories. In his 1979 revision of this typology, however, Lowenstein changed the Social Centralist concept to "Social Authoritarian" to emphasize the authoritarian roots of government-press relations in Communist countries. He then used the Social Centralist label to denote a different model allowing government intervention in the affairs of the press to "assure the operational spirit of the libertarian philosophy" (Mundt, 1991, p. 18). In Lowenstein's typology, the U.S. mass media system continued to be classified, by implication, under the Libertarian model.

Criticizing the four theories and the Lowenstein model for their tendency to "pigeonhole" media systems, Merrill (1974) proposed a "political-press circle", placing Libertarianism at the top and Authoritarianism at the bottom. Viewing the two as interdependent tendencies rather than independent extremes, he argued that the path from Libertarianism toward Authoritarianism may proceed in either direction: from the Left, through socialism, or from the Right, through capitalism (p. 40). The U.S. system again fell under the Libertarian classification. Merrill warned, however, that tendencies such as an emphasis on social responsibility (which he did not consider as having the status of a separate theory) were threatening to push the Libertarian system in the United States towards state intervention.

Hachten (1987) affirmed the inseparability of the Social Responsibility and Libertarian models by putting the two together under the "Western" concept, while adding two new models,

“Revolutionary” and “Developmental,” to the original four. The Revolutionary model refers to the use of mass media by dissidents and opposition movements to overthrow the existing government or to free the state from foreign domination. The Developmental model, on the other hand, refers to the use of mass media by governments, primarily those in the developing nations, to eradicate illiteracy and disease and to achieve national integration and development. In Hachten’s typology, too, the United States remained under the Libertarian/Social Responsibility classification.

Focusing on the problem of concentration of media ownership in the United States, Picard (1985) pronounced the Libertarian model as having passed and offered the “Democratic Socialist” model as a solution, a concept akin to Lowenstein’s Social Centralist model designed to restore the Libertarian spirit to the U.S. system. Like the Social Responsibility model, the Democratic Socialist model requires journalists to “open avenues for the expression of diverse ideas and opinions,” (Picard, 1982-1983, p. 27). The exercise of journalistic responsibility, however, is seen as insufficient by itself to guarantee citizen’s right to participate in the mass communication process (Picard, 1985). Rather, to promote diversity and public participation in the democratic process, the Democratic Socialist model advocates “state action to institute new forms of ownership, operation, and management of the media and significant state intervention in the economics of the press” (Picard, 1982-1983, p. 27). Under this theory,

the press’ purpose is clearly libertarian-tending. The functions of the press are to provide an avenue for expression of views by the public and [ensure] the continued development of democratic governance. Under such an approach, the state takes action to ensure the ability of citizens to use the press and to preserve and promote media plurality.

Thus, pointing to direct state intervention as a remedy for the decline in true media libertarianism, Picard’s Democratic Socialist model attempts to prescribe a means of restoring the essential democratic-libertarian elements (i.e., diversity, plurality, and public access and participation) to the U.S. mass media system.

Picard’s critique of the growing concentration in ownership and decline in the democratic element in the American media is comparable to the critique of U.S. press performance offered by the 1947 Hutchins Commission. But although both models emphasize concentration of ownership as a major detriment to Libertarianism, they differ fundamentally on the nature of the remedy. While Picard proposed government intervention to limit the extent of private ownership, the Commission took the trend toward structural change as a given and argued that being a professional communicator carries with it the social responsibility of making sure that the diverse opinions of the constituency are indeed represented in the media.

The foregoing discussion clarifies the nature of the much-debated link between the Libertarian and Social Responsibility theories. In this context, the Social Responsibility theory may be seen as having arisen from a recognition of structural change in the American mass media system and as a prescriptive attempt to restore the role performance to its original

Libertarian state. Couched in a “structure and performance” analytical framework, in other words, the Social Responsibility theory may be considered to reflect a proposal for conscious change in media performance to compensate for changes in media structure.

Overall, the existing attempts to revise the four-theories typology have continued to view Libertarianism either as a true depiction of the mass media system in the United States or as one capable of being restored in spirit through a series of policy prescriptions. Attempts to counter this view have originated primarily outside the American mainstream, with Marxist theorist who see the media as powerful apparatuses functioning to perpetuate the capitalist system. Although political economists, hegemonic theorists, culturalists, and Frankfurt School scholars differ in their emphases - focusing respectively on the media’s institutional aspects, message characteristics, audience-message interaction, and “commodity” orientation - all four view the media as a means used by the state to “inhibit the growth of opposed class forces or to misinterpret and delegitimize them” (McQuail, 1983, p. 59). Beyond the Marxist theoretical framework, the basic view of the media as “servants” or “agents” of the powerful elites is also shared by Mills (1956) and by Altschull (1984).

Despite their primary preoccupation with elite power, none of these critics views the mass media as an “elite power group” in its own right, capable of exercising independent influence over other powerful elites. This very premise constitutes the basis of the press model proposed in this paper.

The Elite Power Group Model

The “elite power group” model actually denotes structural characteristics not merely different from but *opposite* to those implied by the Libertarian model.

Structurally, the Libertarian model may be described in terms of three primary characteristics: diversity and plurality of media outlets, independence from the power elite, and freedom from government control. Close scrutiny, however, reveals that the mass media in the United States are in fact characterized structurally by concentration in media outlets, integration with other elite power groups (such as big business and government elites), and two-way flow of influence and control between the government and the press.

These characteristics, in turn, give rise to a specific type of role performance that directly contradicts Libertarianism’s original implications. As the media become increasingly concentrated, for example, their ability to serve as forums for the expression of diverse views and opinions diminishes. And to the extent that both media practitioners and owners interlock with, and are integrated into, the elite power circles in government and industry, their willingness and ability to perform a watchdog function may be expected to erode.

Aside from paralyzing the media’s ability to perform the role envisioned for it under the Libertarian model, these interdependent structural characteristics are also mutually reinforcing. Concentration in ownership, for example, tends to be accompanied by conglomeration, which in turn increases economic interlocking between big business and media owners - many of whom

are also integrated with the governing elite in a variety of ways. As the economic and political clout of media executives and practitioners increases, they are increasingly able to block legislative attempts to curb their growing concentration. Thus, the media industry's ability to influence government policy in the direction of its own interests reinforces the tendency toward concentration and conglomeration, leading to a regenerative and increasingly energized positive feedback loop.

If the Libertarian model ever was a true depiction of the American mass media system - and this point is open to debate -¹ from the beginning it contained the seeds of its own destruction in the inherent contradiction between the role of mass media as profit-driven businesses and their role as public institutions. As close scrutiny of the media's current structural characteristics will reveal, the gradual movement away from Libertarianism in the American mass media is now complete. The time has come to replace the Libertarian model with a view of the media as an elite power group in American society.

Concentration of Ownership

The extensive and growing concentration and conglomeration in the American mass media need little further documentation than that already provided by Bagdikian:

Narrow control has advanced rapidly. In 1981, forty-six corporations controlled most of the business in daily newspapers, magazines, television, books, and motion pictures. Today, ... the number of giants that get most of the business has shrunk from forty-six to twenty-three. (1991, p. 280).

In the daily newspaper business alone, since 1983 the number of dominant companies has decreased from 20 to 14. The rapid narrowing of control continues as more and more giants, such as Time Inc. and Warner Communications, merge to further consolidate their stronghold on a variety of vertically integrated media outlets on a global scale. If consolidation continues at the same rate, the entire U.S. communication industry could be dominated by fewer than 10 giant conglomerates by the year 2000 (Bagdikian, 1990, p. 5).

Simultaneous with the growing concentration in ownership, the media industries have expanded their efforts to remove all remaining obstacles to their pursuit of total control and maximum profits. And they have been highly successful in these efforts.²

Aside from the different dimensions of power accruing from control over a growing number of communication channels (e.g., control over what is reported about the media industry and its affiliated businesses and a major impact on the careers of politicians), the success of the media industry in fighting efforts to arrest its growing concentration is a result of its close integration with other power elites in American society.

Integration with Other Power Elites

The concentration and conglomeration in media ownership in the United States has been accompanied by growing integration between the media, big business, and government elites through both interlocking directorates and personnel flow and overlap.

As indicated by Dreier and Weinberg (1970), many directors of media companies are partners or directors of oil companies, banks, insurance companies, and corporate law firms. For example, the nation's largest newspaper chain, Gannett, shares directors with Merrill Lynch, Standard Oil, Phillips Petroleum, Kerr-McGee, Twentieth Century-Fox, McDonnell Douglas, McGraw-Hill, Eastern Airlines, and New York Telephone Company (Bagdikian, 1990, p. 25). Like Gannett's William Rogers, former attorney general and secretary of state, a large number of media directors have previously held high federal office and continue to have ready access to key government decision makers. Overall, as Dreier and Weinberg have noted, "the directors are linked with powerful business organizations, not with public interest groups; with management, not with labor; with well-established think tanks and charities, not their grass-roots counterparts" (1970, p. 51).

Another means of media-elite integration is the extensive personnel flow and overlap between the government and the mass media industry. Entering the journalistic profession from a political background is increasingly common (Burnell, Ross, Settlage, & Tierney, 1982). The structural implications of this trend are further exacerbated by publishers' and broadcast media owners' tendency to embrace these "revolving door" journalists rather than in any way inhibit their entry into the profession. In fact, the "celebrity" status acquired while in government service - as a press secretary, for example - often accelerates the rise of such journalists in the professional ranks over their "purer" colleagues (Witcover, 1990). The primary concern here is not the objectivity of the media product produced by such politician-turned-journalists but rather the commonality of interests thus created between the government and media elites and its structural implications vis-à-vis the Libertarian model.

Among some of the best-known "turnstile" journalists are Pierre Salinger of ABC, previously John F. Kennedy's press secretary; John Chancellor of NBC, formerly the director of the Voice of America; Leslie Gelb, presently of *The New York Times*, who left the *Times* on two separate occasions to serve at the Pentagon and the State Department; David Gergen, editor of *U.S. News and World Report*, previously a member of the Reagan administration; William Safire, a one-time Nixon speech writer who is now a *New York Times* columnist; Diane Sawyer of ABC News, former aide to Ron Ziegler in the Nixon White House; and Hodding Carter III, who left journalism to become a State Department spokesman under President Carter and is now a television commentator.

Burnell, Ross, Settlage, and Tierney (1982) and Witcover (1990) provide additional but by no means exhaustive listings of "turnstile" journalists. The number of journalists with former and continuing ties to the governing elite in the United States is much larger and is rapidly increasing at all levels of the media industry.

The personnel overlap between the governing and the media elite, however, is not limited to the news industry. Nor is it a one-way flow. A major additional area of overlap exists between the media industry and the government agencies created to regulate and oversee that industry in the public's interest. Historically, many members of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) have come either from executive ranks within the media industry or from positions closely identified with media interests. It is not uncommon, furthermore, for FCC members to later head major media associations that actively lobby on behalf of the media industry (see Krasnow, Longley, & Terry, 1982).

There is strong evidence that FCC members coming from a broadcasting background are more likely to be responsive to the industry's interests. Lichty (1961-1962) and Williams (1976) have shown that the FCC commissioners' background is a major determinant of their policy decisions. More specific research by Gormley (1979) has shown that commissioners with a broadcast industry background tend to identify strongly with the industry's policy preferences and values. This identification transcends the effects of ideological determinants in the policy process, particularly with respect to deregulation: "The fact that the former broadcasters vacillate on deregulation, depending on whether deregulation helps or hinders broadcasters, indicates that their commitment to the broadcasting industry is more fundamental than their commitment to philosophical consistency" (p. 681).

The integration and interlocking between the media and governing elites has thus created a situation in which an increasingly dominant economic interest group - the media elite - exerts considerable control over the means of its own scrutiny (Phillips, 1977), not only through control over information but also through direct influence over the government bodies created to monitor and regulate its activities.

Two-way Flow of Influence

The flow of influence between government and mass media moves in two directions. Each form of influence is discussed in turn.

Government Influence on the Mass Media

No press system in the world - no matter how close to Libertarian - is completely free from government control. Legal restrictions in the areas of libel, obscenity, and national security, though controversial in specific cases, always have been recognized as safeguards necessary to protect other rights and freedoms in a democratic society.

Aside from these clear exceptions to an absolute freedom for the press, the newsgathering routine of the media organizations themselves often opens them up to manipulation by government officials (e.g., Sigal, 1973). Far from striving to perform as the government's adversary, news organizations are driven primarily by the need to fill their newsholes as

efficiently and conveniently as possible (Fishman, 1980), to catch the largest possible “fish” in their “news net” (Tuchman, 1978), and to create an aura of credibility without spending too much time and money investigating the “facts” (Tuchman, 1978). These basic institutional objectives, in turn, create newsgathering routines that emphasize beat reporting, staged “pseudo-events” (Boorstin, 1962), and quotes from “credible” sources (Tuchman, 1978). The idea that the U.S. news media today are often little more than “transmission belts” for the official viewpoint, thriving on ready-made handouts, press releases, press conferences, background briefings, and quotes from prominent officials, is thus well documented and widely accepted in the academic community.

Critical voices also are often raised from within the journalistic profession itself. In a recent article in *Editor & Publisher*, Winship (1990) criticized the Washington press corps for its “long winter’s nap during the Reagan years when all those giant stories were missed or botched - the S&L heist, the HUD scandals, Iran-Contra, and the pollution by radiation of 100 nuclear plants” (p. 52). More than 4,600 reporters, representing some 870 news organizations in Washington, he charged, file exactly the same stories every day, most if not all of which are based on “staged events.”

As pointed out by Bethell (1977), even seemingly great investigative reporting is often nothing of the sort. For example, contrary to widely held belief, it was not the celebrated reporters Woodward and Bernstein who opened the Watergate case, but dissident voices within a government at war with itself (p. 35). Thus, far from reflecting the vigilance of an adversary press keeping a watchful eye on the government, such “investigative” episodes represent another instance - beyond official briefings and press releases - in which the largely complacent media have been given yet another “handout,” this time by a “non-official” government source.

Mass media performance in the United States may thus be considered to deviate considerably from the adversarial role vis-à-vis the government envisioned for it under the Libertarian theory.

Mass Media Influence on the Government

While the media’s deviation from the Libertarian ideal of government watchdog is well documented, few studies to date have addressed the extensive reverse control exercised by the media on the government.

The various segments of the mass media industry in the United States have long functioned as highly powerful elite interest groups, due largely to the power gained through concentration of ownership and integration with the ruling and big business elites, but also due partly to the powerful nature of their profession - commanding the flow of information to the public. Close scrutiny of government policy-making processes concerning each media segment - print, over-the-air broadcasting, and cable - clearly reveals the powerful influence exercised by each on policy outcomes.

Both the print and electronic media industries have well-established and highly visible lobbying organizations in Washington that serve to channel the collective power of the media industry by communicating its position forcefully and directly to politicians.

Because of the First Amendment protection afforded to the print media in the United States, few government policy-making cases involve the newspaper industry. Almost every such case, however, has been resolved in a manner consistent with the demands of the newspaper industry.

The principal print media organizations are the American Newspaper Publishers Association (ANPA), the National Newspaper Association (NNA), and the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE). All three maintain regular and close personal contact with government officials at the state as well as federal levels and engage in lobbying efforts, although ASNE keeps a lower profile than ANPA and NNA. All three are among Washington's most powerful lobbying organizations, with ANPA wielding perhaps the greatest level of power. According to Tunstall (1986, p. 274), ANPA is "so powerful that it seldom needs to actually engage in much serious lobbying."

In addition to aggressively presenting their positions and demands to the relevant officials through direct personal contact, these associations bring extensive pressure to bear on policy makers by orchestrating editorial writing campaigns in support of the industry's position on issues affecting its financial and other interests. One such editorial crusade occurred against provisions in the 1980 AT&T bill that would have allowed AT&T to launch an "electronic Yellow Pages," a potential competitor to newspaper classified advertising. Among the major national newspapers editorializing on the issue was *The Washington Post*. The *Post* editorials were written during the same week that *Post* editor Katharine Graham, then chairman of ANPA, was lobbying Congress on the AT&T issue on behalf of the industry (Keller, 1980, p. 2184). Once again the newspaper industry emerged triumphant, as an amendment was added to the bill barring AT&T from engaging in such a business.

Among the few regulatory cases involving the newspaper industry, the passage of the 1970 Newspaper Preservation Act perhaps best reveals the media elite's lobbying prowess.³ The origins of the Act date back to 1967, when in response to vigorous lobbying by the newspaper industry a bill was introduced in Congress aimed at exempting joint newspaper business and production operations from antitrust action. In spite of the bill's rejection by Congress, 44 newspapers across the country continued to maintain joint operating agreements. A shock wave was felt across the industry in 1969, however, when the Justice Department brought successful action against two jointly operating local newspapers in Tucson, Arizona. The summary judgment, declaring such joint operations unlawful, was subsequently upheld by the Supreme Court (Compaine et al., 1982).

Following the Supreme Court decision, the newspaper industry began an unprecedented process of muscle flexing. Backed by ANPA, the editors and publishers of the affected newspapers set about personally to lobby Congress, the administration, and the president on the issue. According to Bagdikian (1990, p. 90), the lobbying effort went as far as the issuance of a

not-so-subtle threat by Richard Berlin, Hearst Corporation CEO, to President Nixon. Nixon's intervention was instrumental in the ultimate passing of the Newspaper Preservation Act in 1970. Sen. Thomas McIntyre charged afterward that the bill's passage was due to "the tremendous political clout of the media barons whose profits would be fattened by it" (Keller, 1980, p. 2177).

Another example of newspapers lobbying for special treatment occurred in response to the 1980 gasoline rationing plan issued by the Department of Energy under the Carter administration. The plan, developed in anticipation of an oil shortage, entitled specific businesses engaged in "priority class activities" to extra allotments of gasoline at the normal price, leaving other businesses to bid for surplus coupons in the open market. As a result of extensive industry pressure, newspaper distribution was ultimately classified as a "priority class activity" in the plan (Keller, 1980, p. 2178).⁴

As a regulated industry, broadcasting has had a long history of vigorous lobbying on Capitol Hill. Represented by the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) and National Cable Television Association (NCTA), respectively, broadcasting and, more recently, cable interests presently comprise two of the most powerful lobbying groups in Washington, wining and dining officials and applying just the right measure of intimidation to get their way in Congress and the FCC. The power of the media lobby is further strengthened by "their ability to cause a stir back in Main Street, USA" (Tunstall, 1986, p. 269). As Lionel Van Deerlin, former House Communications Subcommittee Chairman explains, when politicians return home they "don't want to be ignored by radio and television" (Keller, 1980, p. 2180).

The power of the electronic media elites to affect government policy outcomes is clearly revealed in the successful effort by the three television networks to stall the introduction of program origination cable for many years. Organized resistance to cable by the NAB finally began to break down in the early 1970s when a few powerful members within the organization who had acquired cable holdings, such as CBS and NBC, began to show an interest in cable development (Thorp, 1970).

Just as the united front within the NAB had succeeded in keeping cable a mere supplement to over-the-air broadcasting for many years, divided loyalties within the organization arising from major ownership of cable systems by broadcasters finally led to a 1980 FCC vote lifting all restrictions to original programming by cable. The division of interests between the NAB and NCTA has continued to be blurred by the growing cross-ownership of cable systems by major broadcasting organizations.

The evolution of the 1990 cable reregulation bill is another clear reflection of the extent to which media policy decisions in the United States are the outcome of an effort to accommodate various powerful media interests. Politicians' accountability to their local constituents is often subordinated to their wish to please their far more powerful media constituency.

After having been held back for many years as a result of NAB lobbying efforts, cable television finally began to flourish in the United States in the early 1980s. In line with the general deregulatory mood of the Reagan era and in an effort, ostensibly, to spur cable's late

development, the cable industry was completely deregulated in 1984. By 1989, however, it was clear that half a decade of unregulated activity by the cable operators had undermined, rather than served, the interests of consumers by encouraging monopoly and leading to skyrocketing rates and shoddy service (Mills, 1990). The mounting complaints, leading to unfavorable perceptions of the industry by present and potential investors, ultimately led to efforts on Capitol Hill to reregulate cable. Both the House and the Senate proposed bills containing measures to monitor cable rates and service and to reverse the effects of the growing trend toward concentration and vertical integration in the industry. While supporting the idea of a bill that could counteract the perceptions of chaos and thus halt slipping stock values, the NCTA actively opposed the more substantive versions of the two bills, “particularly the Senate language that would outlaw exclusive programming deals between cable operators and affiliated programmers” (Mills, 1990).

In this process, NCTA President James Mooney, previously a top aide to former House Majority Whip John Brademas, personally lobbied Rep. John Dingell, Sen. Ernest Hollings, and other key congressional members and staff. He was accompanied in this effort by a number of top cable industry executives, most visibly Steven Ross of Time-Warner Inc. In addition to NCTA mobilizing its elite contacts at all levels, its political action committee, Cable PAC, increased its campaign contributions, primarily to House and Senate incumbents, from \$338,992 in the 1988 election cycle to \$491,462 for 1990 races (Mills, 1990).

By the Fall of 1990, NCTA’s opposition to the bill had led to a watered-down version that appeared acceptable to the industry. This version contained language barring the regional telephone companies from carrying programs on their fiber optic networks. Thus, this was a major victory for the cable industry, won in the face of the regional telephone companies’ \$20 million campaign to secure for themselves the right to enter the video programming business (Mills, 1990).

For its part, the cable industry’s competitor, the NAB, initially lent vigorous support to the bill, which, aside from curtailing some of cable’s other competitive advantages, required cable operators to carry all the local signals in their area. At the last minute, however, the NAB dropped its support of the bill, in large part because the networks, led by CBS, concluded that “the cable legislation as it was shaping up could foreclose what the networks and their affiliates really want - some mechanism for charging cable operators for carriage of their signals” (“Can Cable Win for Losing?”, 1990, p. 24). The last-minute change of position by the NAB, along with the NCTA’s vigorous opposition efforts (geared toward passing a less restrictive bill), finally led to the death of the bill for the time being.

The fact that a bill initiated as a means of addressing a major public concern has followed a path charted so closely by the two media industry lobbies clearly reflects the media elite’s overriding influence on government policy.

Conclusion

This study has argued that the traditional Libertarian model does not provide a realistic description of the current mass media system in the United States. It has argued, furthermore, that the widely discussed deviations from the model can no longer be considered as mere anomalies within an essentially Libertarian system. Characterized by growing concentration and conglomeration (as opposed to diversity and plurality), integration with other power elites (as opposed to independence), and the ability to exercise reverse control on the government even as they are controlled by it (as opposed to functioning as an adversary of the government in the public interest), the media in the United States may be viewed more realistically as an elite power group.

The model proposed in this study differs from other relevant media theories in that it goes beyond viewing the media as servants of the power elite. The model suggests that the media are *themselves* a power elite - an elite whose power is steadily increasing through a positive feedback loop created by such mutually reinforcing structural characteristics as concentration of ownership, integration with other power elites, and successful control of government media policy.

Notes

¹Although increasing concentration in ownership may be expected to erode press diversity and independence, it cannot simply be assumed that the American media were truly diverse and independent when they were less concentrated.

²The growing success of the media in combating curbs to their concentration has further led to a near complete ascendancy of profit over public trust in the media's operations. As major media chains push their executives to demand both high and increasing profits to avoid decline in stock values, the news budget and the resources and strategies needed to pursue quality journalism suffer.

³Critics consider the Newspaper Preservation Act another instance in which the media have tried to use the First Amendment to cloak their argument for economic gain. Proponents of the Act argue that, regardless of original motivations, joint operating agreements have in fact contributed to the diversity of voices in U.S. society by maintaining two newspapers in cities where only one would otherwise exist. The focus in this paper, however, is on the very fact that the newspaper industry as a whole is able to form such a powerful lobby and influence government policy in the direction of its own interests.

⁴The newspaper industry also has lobbied to either gain or protect such favors as special postal rates for newspapers and magazines, exemptions from the minimum wage and child labor laws for newspaper carriers, and favorable tariff rates on imported newsprint.

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