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Defining Media through Ownership

Since White's (1950) seminal article asserting that journalists act as gatekeepers of information, researchers have been examining the higher level influence of ownership in dictating content (Gitlin 1980; Shoemaker & Reese 1996). It has been argued that those who control the media also control the predominant ideology of society (Grossberg *et al.* 1998; Herman & Chomsky 1988; McChesney 1999). One of the principal points of opposition against the present media merger frenzy is the fear that a monolithically owned media will create content that is one-dimensional and therefore lead to a less-informed public. This fear is based on the precept that a multiplicity of outlets will offer a multiplicity of voices (Bagdikian 2000; Shoemaker *et al.* 1991). There is a widespread and historical presumption that concentration of media ownership is not healthy for freedom of expression or for a plurality of perspectives (Ofcom 2006). In 1945, the US Supreme Court stated 'one of the most vital of all general interests [is] the dissemination of news from as many different sources, and with as many different facets and colors as is possible. That interest ... presupposes that right conclusions are more likely to be gathered out of a multitude of tongues, than through any kind of authoritative selection' (US Supreme Court 1945). The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in America has historically concurred and 'traditionally assumed that there is a positive correlation between viewpoints expressed and ownership of an outlet. The Commission has sought, therefore to diffuse ownership of media outlets among multiple firms in order to diversify the viewpoints available to the public' (Federal Communications Commission 2003). However, counter to this stated position, the FCC and other regulatory agencies around the world have slowly been relaxing media regulations and allowing media conglomerates to deepen their horizontal and vertical streams of ownership. This has led many in academia to argue that these fundamental principles of diversity in ownership have been ignored and the present media system is far too concentrated to ensure a healthy democracy (Bagdikian 2000).

The rate of media concentration has been staggering. Even the media baron Rupert Murdoch has described the current pattern of technological development followed by corporate consolidation and then global content distribution, as 'fairly chaotic' (Select Committee on Communications (Lords) 2008: 118). The speed of this process has been no less than dizzying. This frenzied accumulation of media has many concerned because they view a conglomeration of media as

implicitly a conglomeration of power. If political power is centralized, then 'the media of communication tend to become instruments of that centralization; the uses to which the media are put reflect both the needs of the ruling group in maintaining their power and advancing their policies, and also the lines of control that run from the political center out or down to subordinate units' (Cohen 1963: 16).

Echoing the concerns of the Supreme Court in 1945, some have gone further to suggest that a monopolistic, conglomerated media, existing without diversification in ownership, allows for propaganda to thrive. After all, propaganda can only exist in accordance with a centrally controlled media system. 'As long as a large number of independent news agencies, newsreel producers, and diverse local papers function, no conscious and direct propaganda is possible' (Ellul 1969: 102). To the contrary, a concentration of ownership in the hands of a few transnational media corporations can give 'dominant firms in local markets an immense amount of power to influence critical decisions' (Cooper 2002: 6) through propaganda that only informs citizens what the dominant media firm wants them to know about. Research in support of such claims has found that after mergers take place, there is a marked level of homogenization with the parent company's historical patterns of content (Bush & Zimmerman 2010).

These kinds of results do not bode well for smaller media companies that are constantly under threat from large conglomerates. In some countries, almost all of the media companies are owned by overseas managers. For example, very few of New Zealand's media outlets are actually owned by New Zealanders. The Australian media conglomerate Fairfax Media Publications owns both of the two Sunday newspapers, *Sunday News* and *Sunday Star Times*. Only one of the six major metropolitan newspapers, the *Otago Daily Times*, is outside of major corporate control. The transnational companies, APN News and Media (ANM) and Fairfax, own 16 (72 per cent) of the 22 peripheral provincial newspapers (Industry Overview 2006). If provincial and metropolitan outlets are combined, only 8.6 per cent of all mainstream newspapers are independently owned in New Zealand (Lealand 2008). Roughly 63 per cent of daily and weekly newspaper circulation is owned by Fairfax and 28.5 per cent is owned by APN (Lealand 2008). This means that out of roughly 4.3 million people 'only about 60,000 readers still have an independent daily newspaper – 10,000 less than in 2001' (Rosenberg 2008: 2). Paul Norris, the previous head of one of the leading broadcasting training institutions in New Zealand, has argued that foreign ownership in the country is 'without parallel in the Western world' (Paul Norris 2002: 36). In fact, in New Zealand, every 'major media company in the private sector is foreign-owned' (Paul Norris 2002: 36). This is an amazing statement in a world already overrun by conglomerated media corporations.

The moral acceptance of increased consolidation that has been argued to put revenue building before newsgathering is a major contributor to the present, consolidated media marketplace. There has been 'a paradigm shift in the media sector – from a supply to a consumer-driven model' (Valcke 2009: 22). The media are now largely considered to be simply another product to be consumed and not an essential component of a healthy democracy. This shift is reflective of an overall change in attitude towards consumerism over the last half century. This change on the part of both audience members and producers has resulted in a vastly different media system, which is much more likely to respond to consumer desires than citizen initiatives.

As media conglomerates continue to grow – at last count six firms controlled most of the news, entertainment and commentary in the world – academic interest in media regulation and ownership has also intensified. Recent scholarship has argued that ownership is paramount in deciding journalism norms, behaviours and routines because it is the owners who, either directly or indirectly, have been argued to have the greatest influence over the final product (Bagdikian 2000; Chomsky 2006; Pritchard, Terry & Brewer 2008). Some have suggested that this influence on content is connected to the owner's relationship, or lack thereof, with the community. Shoemaker and Reese state that 'the greater the physical distance of the owners from the community being served, the more community interests may take a backseat to corporate and economic factors' (Shoemaker and Reese 1990b: 167). Therefore, without an undivided interest in the surrounding community, media owners are more apt to supplant consumer interests with corporate subsidies.

Researchers examining diversity in ownership argue that media owners have a critical role to play in dictating content, but because most contemporary media owners are situated outside of a wide range of audience identities, the owners produce content that most readers do not believe reflects their own interests. Women own less than 6 per cent of commercial television stations in America, while minorities own slightly more than 3 per cent (Turner & Mark 2007). The critical/cultural philosophers, Habermas and Ellul, see this lack of diversity in ownership leading to a lack of local coverage (Omachonu & Healey 2010). If the owners' identities are not intertwined with those who read their mediated texts, the owners are much more likely to opt for global, nationalized content that has already been collected rather than investing their energy and money into collecting media fare with a local angle.

This reliance on prepackaged national content has been connected directly to corporate ownership, creating a 'hegemonic expediency' across professional, conglomerated newsrooms. In one such case, 40 television stations were found to re-broadcast a Department of Health and Human Services video news release about a 2003 White House-supported Medicare law (St John III 2008). The governmental video news release was relayed as if it were genuine news, when in fact it could easily have been seen as propaganda. In this case it

was suggested that journalists ‘internalized the needs of news owners’ whose influence ‘not only constructs the economic realities of the newsroom but also shapes how journalists perceive their range of ethical choices’ (St John III 2008: 111). In doing so, reporters made ethical decisions to publish content that they knew was not created by journalists but was economically advantageous for the owners. Research such as this suggests that the interests of owners have the ability to permeate routine decisions in media organizations and are the driver of daily decision-making.

Ownership has been suggested to be paramount in deciding journalism norms, behaviours and routines because it is the owners who presumably – either directly or indirectly – have the greatest influence over the final product (Bagdikian 2000; Shoemaker & Reese 1990b). As is the case in any company, the owner can set and enforce policy. This means that the organizational level of influence can be particularly powerful in terms of resulting newspaper content. However, unpacking this influence of ownership can also be notoriously difficult. Patterns of interrelationships can eventuate in ways that are not immediately apparent. For example, when Silvio Berlusconi, the conservative leader of the centre-right coalition in Italy and president of the private television network Fininvest, was re-elected prime minister of Italy in 2001, it was found that news content on public television became more conservative (Durante & Knight 2009). This change in public television’s approach may have been in response to his political rise to power purely as a prime minister or it may have been a competitive retort to his influence on the private broadcasting network he owns. It would be impossible to fully disentangle the causal relationship even though there appeared to be an indirect connection based on the ownership of Fininvest. Changes in media content after changes in ownership suggest that the owner of a media company may indeed have a relatively strong influence on content.

Homogeneity across media owners

As this review illustrates, much of the research exploring the influence of owners on media content has indeed found striking results. However, this book, like other research examining the political economy of news (i.e. McChesney 2000a), argues that simply changing owners will likely not have a dramatic influence on content. Rather, it is the entire capitalistic framework that interconnects the institution of media into a larger hegemonic system that has the most powerful influence on content (McChesney 2000a). It is this system that is intrinsically woven throughout, not only the media industry but also the entire contemporary social, political and economic environment. This fundamental state of a consumer-driven, corporate environment makes it

difficult to compare content across the media spectrum when almost all ‘media outlets – even those that editorially oppose “corporate media” – are themselves corporations’ (Pritchard *et al.* 2008: 2). This intrinsic corporate model of operations throughout the media spectrum is seen by some as inherently contradictory to how media should operate. However, such a corporate focus has become more accepted within media over time. Even with such widespread acceptance, the contemporary media system certainly still has its critics. In the technological rush for conglomerated efficiency in the assimilation, distribution and profiteering of news, modern conglomerated media across the entire spectrum may be sacrificing their ethical and moral core. Stated bluntly, ‘efficiency and morality are a contradiction in terms’ (Christians 2002: 83) that threaten the media as a whole.

The blame for a corporatized media generally falls on the mainstream, but when one examines the history and development of mainstream media, and in particular journalism, their altruistic, democratizing, investigative roots are apparent. It is undeniable that media are increasingly sensationalistic and consumer driven. However, this focus on entertainment has not always been such a central part of media content. While mainstream news media have never been particularly attentive to the issues surrounding marginalized groups, they have historically served as the watchdogs of our society – and therefore satisfied the informational demands of mainstream society. This mantra of investigative journalism dates back to the first English periodicals in the seventeenth century. *The Parliament Scout*, which first began in 1643, and *The Spie*, which rolled off the presses one year later, were both dedicated to muckraking, independent reporting. Even these names ‘suggested something new in journalism – the necessity of making an effort to search out and discover the news’ (Sommerville 1996: 65). Perhaps drawing from the rich tradition of muckraking journalism across the Atlantic, James Madison called for all journalism to serve as ‘a bulwark of liberty’ when crafting the Bill of Rights in the United States. The auspicious origins of journalism flourished until somewhat of an apex, which began at the turn of the twentieth century. In 1900, Ida Tarbell exposed the ruthless and destructive business practices of John D. Rockefeller when he served as head of the Standard Oil Corporation. This work was originally published in an 18-part series by *McClure* magazine and was later turned into a popular book. In 1906, Upton Sinclair wrote the classic novel, *The Jungle*, which exposed the brutal meatpacking plants in Chicago. Sixty-six years later, in 1972, the Watergate scandal was exposed by two intrepid reporters, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, and resulted in the resignation of President Richard Nixon. As these examples illustrate, citizens have long been able to live within a deliberative democracy, such as this, under the assumption that mainstream news journalism served as an important check on governmental power and industry abuse. Yet much of that has changed in recent years. Drastic cutbacks in globalized conglomerate media corporations

have meant that modern journalism is now severely under-resourced, under-funded and largely unable to serve as a corrective, balancing force against power, corruption and greed. While many mainstream journalism institutions proclaim to be investigative watchdogs, most of contemporary news remain focused on lifestyle, health and celebrity entertainment with relatively little attention to areas such as national security, education, economics, the military and social welfare (Kovach & Rosenstiel 2001).

The rise of a contemporary, 'trivial press' in western democracies can be traced to the establishment of a 'stable bourgeois democracy' (Bek 2004: 374), which is embedded within a capitalistic system of governance. As societies grow more democratically stable, the population slowly divorces itself from political and economic matters and the press becomes more trivial. Similarities in coverage across media outlets are then likely not as closely aligned to ownership, but to a widespread capitalistic, free-market ideology and the implicit acceptance from citizens that capitalism is needed as an intrinsic tie to democracy within western societies (Christiansen & Barnartt 1995). The omnipresent ideology of commercialism across the media spectrum problematizes the role of specific owners dictating content in either alternative or mainstream media. A more economic perspective on ownership argues that audience preferences, advertisers' financial interests, market technological capabilities and institutional profitability have a much stronger influence on content than ownership (Hamilton 2004). As businesses standardize and find more efficient modes of telling stories, content becomes more homogenized over time (Underwood 1993b). The media industry has moved to more formulaic and standardized forms of content because of economic pressures. This economic mandate to demand profitability has resulted in content that appears personalized but simply 'reflect(s) greater diversity in formatting and packaging in response to market demands' (Bennett 1996: 374–5) and not meaningful variations in content. Consumer preferences play an inordinately large role in dictating content, whereas ownership has a reduced level of influence within this broader capitalistic media system (Gentzkow & Shapiro 2010). Certainly, owners play an important role in crafting content, but it is impossible to divorce the owner from the system that she or he operates within.

A large range of research has found homogeneity across news outlets that are owned by different corporate institutions. The purpose of these studies may not have been to examine the influence of ownership models on content, but if little difference exists between media outlets owned by different corporations, one might be able to infer that ownership has actually played a minimal role in dictating coverage. For example, the three major television networks in the United States, each owned by a different parent company, all dedicated very little coverage to the genocide in Darfur – unless celebrity actors like George Clooney, Mia Farrow or Angelina Jolie dedicated their own attention to the deaths. When that happened, all three broadcasters reported on their

activities (Eke 2008). These similarities in coverage have very little to do with the owner and everything to do with the predominant corporate ideology of consumer preferences. Similar results were found by the American Progress Action Fund (2005), which examined cable news networks, CNN, MSNBC and FOX News, and found a universal dearth of information on the fighting in Sudan but extensive coverage of the Michael Jackson trial, Tom Cruise and the 'Runaway Bride'.

Other research, which has attempted to examine ownership influence directly, has found striking uniformity across varied ownership models. One recent study examined commonly owned newspapers, television stations and radio stations in three separate communities during the 2004 presidential campaign in the United States (Pritchard *et al.* 2008). These researchers found that one owner does not necessarily translate to one voice across their media ownings. In fact, they found that cross-owned media served the public interest in the same manner as independent companies and neither type of media outlet was found to be more or less 'favourable' to a particular candidate. The authors cautioned that these findings do not mean that 'media owners do not have the ability, in theory, to slant the news and opinion their newspapers, television stations, and radio stations disseminate. It is to say, however, that there is no evidence that the owners of mainstream media outlets – those that cater to broad, ideologically diverse audiences – systematically use their theoretical power to slant the news' (Pritchard *et al.* 2008: 24). This finding was echoed in still other work reporting that cross-owned broadcasting stations actually provided about 11 per cent more news programming every day than television stations that were independently owned (Shiman 2007). Further work from the Project for Excellence in Journalism examined over 23,000 stories on 154 stations and found that the news originating from stations that were cross-owned with newspapers were of a higher quality than those that did not have such an organizational structure (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2003).

There are two broad factors that have been suggested as central to a robust, democratic media: localism and diversity (Napoli 2007). Theories concerning the influence of ownership in achieving localism and diversity in news content generally fall into two categories: geographical distance from the audience and economic interests. As was briefly discussed in the beginning of this chapter, the first argument is that the more physically local the ownership and management are, the more a news outlet will pay attention to local issues (Napoli 2001). However, in an examination of 289 American television stations, it was found that 'ownership concentration does not appear to hinder or promote the provision of local public affairs programming' (Yan & Napoli 2008: 20). In fact, none of the following were found to be contributing factors to local news production in broadcasting: duopolistic ownership structure, existing as part of a larger broadcast network, location in the same geographical area of the broadcast market area or extended ownership of another broadcast station in

the same market (Napoli & Yan 2007). Further, a broadcast station's financial strength and competition within the market had been found to have a more positive effect on the amount of local broadcasting news than the geographic locality of the owner (Napoli & Yan 2007).

Another sweeping study from Gentzkow and Shapiro (2010) examined phrases used by members of US Congress and then identified which phrases were then used predominantly by one political party or another. The authors then compared these phrases to content from 400 daily newspapers (representing 70 per cent of total daily US circulation) in an effort to uncover bias and potentially help to understand the role of ownership in content. For example, phrases labelled as conservative or Republican, such as 'death tax' and 'war on terror' were compared against Democratic or liberal phrases such as 'estate tax' and 'war in Iraq'. Drawing from the work of Mullainathan and Shleifer (2005), the researchers then compared circulation rates with zip codes and voting patterns and found that readers demanded newspaper content which engaged with their own personal political ideology. For example, those in predominantly Republican zip codes subscribed to newspapers that relied on Republican phrases more and those in predominantly Democratic zip codes subscribed to newspapers that relied on Democratic phrases more. When these comparisons were made in states across America, the influence of ownership largely disappeared (Gentzkow & Shapiro 2010). Here again, consumer ideology rather than the ideology of a specific owner, was the largest predictor of newspaper slant or bias.

These types of studies suggest that there is a strong demand for biased information across society, which is being met by revenue-seeking media within a competitive capitalistic environment. Biased information confirms one's own personal ideologies. Citizens support newspapers that confirm to their own beliefs. Individuals hold news outlets in higher esteem and believe they are of a higher quality if they substantiate their own prior expectations (Gentzkow & Shapiro 2010). Therefore, news outlets don't slant their reporting due to ownership dictates. Rather, newspapers slant their reporting to align with readers' previously held beliefs 'in order to build a reputation for quality' (Gentzkow & Shapiro 2006: 280) and therefore boost circulation numbers. This cycle of confirming ideologies through biased and selective information is perpetually circuitous, as an article titled 'The Self-Perpetuation of Biased Beliefs' states plainly: 'bias begets bias' (Suen 2004: 379). Each media outlet might have a particular perspective that some see as biased, but these perspectives derive from a truncated range of options on offer within a commercial media environment.

This suggests that merely examining who owns the media does not guarantee a pluralism in perspectives. Media types, legal indicators, economic factors and media genres must be considered in assessing media pluralism (Valcke 2009). This broad model of assessment, which was

prepared for the European Commission, has been called the Media Pluralism Monitor. Measurement tools such as this have helped to better understand what actually constitutes diversity in media content. It is a complicated and ambiguous descriptor (Entman & Wildman 1992) for what many consider to be the cornerstone of a democratic media system that then helps to create a well-informed citizenry. Variety, as Glasser (1984) points out, is about the raw numbers of choices available, but diversity also addresses characteristic differences. Diversity, within the larger context of a marketplace of ideas, has been deconstructed into three components: source, content and exposure (Napoli 1999). Source diversity includes diversity in ownership of programming and media outlets as well as diversity in the workforce. Content diversity deals with programme types, demographic representations and ideas or viewpoints represented. There is an assumption in regulatory policy-making that the greater the amount of source diversity there is, the greater the amount of content diversity (McChesney 2007). However, there are numerous legal challenges in the United States, highlighted by Napoli (1999), in addition to the studies reviewed here, which suggest that American policymakers have yet to demonstrate substantiated causal support for this presumed relationship.

Exposure diversity asks how much diversity in content is actually received by audiences, either horizontally across all broadcast channels, magazines or newspapers, for example, or vertically, within an individual channel, magazine or newspaper (Napoli 1999). Exposure diversity is generally the most overlooked aspect of diversity, but offers interesting insights into the 'more is more' concept of media variability and difference. Increasing underrepresented types of programmes can actually lead to a decrease in audience reception for those programme types (Wober 1989, cited in Napoli 1999). Youn (1994) also found that increasing the diversity in programme choices on cable television led to audience members significantly limiting their own exposure to those increased viewing options. It has been found that television consumers tend to stay focused on only 13 channels, no matter how many options given, which is about the same number of websites that the average Internet user will check regularly (Ferguson & Perse 2000). With all the limitless information available online, research has found that there is much more concentration of audience attention online than in other traditional forms of media with less options for content, such as television, radio and newspapers (Hindman 2007) and that focus remains clustered around well-known, institutional media outlets (Dahlberg 2005). Therefore, calls to tighten restrictions on media ownership in the context of contemporary technological advancements may not be realistic or necessary. Broadband Internet connectivity, mobile phones and social networking sites all contribute to a plurality in perspectives that was not possible in the past, whether users access this diversity in content or not.

Despite how audience members select and process content, there remains a consistent finding in ownership research that problematizes the notion of

an omnipresent owner shaping the media. The relative homogeneity found in media content is a globalized phenomenon within media dependent upon a capitalistic framework. In an examination of Argentina's print and online newspapers, Boczkowski and de Santos (2007) found that there were distinctive patterns of homogenization, or a focus on the same stories, between a specific print newspaper and its online distribution, between online newspapers, and indeed, across all print and online newspapers. Previous research has suggested that similarity in coverage is primarily due to shared patterns and processes of journalistic practice and the persistent monitoring of other media (Plasser 2005; Schudson 2003). These processes have become homogenized within a shared capitalistic framework of media outlets. The accelerated news cycle and reliance on the interconnected wire service are also recurring reasons for any homogenization of content (Rosenstiel 2005). Both of these commonly used newsgathering tactics are directly tied to economic incentives aimed to build profit from media content.

Corporately owned news

The floor has been slowly dropping on mainstream journalism for years. The Internet has certainly accelerated the rate of decline, but the relatively recent corporate model of management and ownership in journalism is the ultimate culprit. The late Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black argued in his last opinion in 1971 that 'the government's power to censor the press was abolished so that the press would remain forever free to censure the government. The press was protected so that it could bare the secrets of government and inform the people. Only a free and unrestrained press can effectively expose deception in government' (cited in Gerhart 1998: 388). Yet the profiteering focus of news reporting has meant the press are not 'free and unrestrained', as there are very real fiscal restrictions on the types of news stories that are now told. The imposition of a business model has changed how journalism approaches investigative reporting and how we, as citizens, view journalism. It is this very perception of journalism as a business that has kept citizens from protesting the present state of news media. If modern mainstream journalism is based on a capitalistic, competitive market, then it simply must be producing what 'the people' want (McChesney 2004). In such a marketplace, the corporation is shackled to supposedly insatiable public desires that are responsible for the falling standards in modern journalism.

The power of choice by an individual citizen between news media is drastically blunted in a corporate media environment. The choices given to an average news consumer are still largely limited – even with the Internet revolution of information. Citizens choose from the relatively narrow

range of news that fills the global mainstream newshole. As they make their selections from within the news offered, the individual producers within these conglomerates are vindicated that consumers chose to read their news, rather than another outlet. But very little attention is paid to the level of commercialization within news content. Could it be that viewers actually want an entire broadsheet of advertising on page two of the newspaper? Do citizens enjoy having their 30-minute news broadcast interrupted by 8 minutes of commercials? Do these same citizens revel in the paid product placement that occurs within the news programme itself? What types of news stories exist as a whole and what interface or framework exists for exposure to news stories? The consumerism embedded within the contemporary media system has, for example, created an environment whereby the press largely ignores the failures of business but increases their coverage of government inadequacies (Croteau & Hoynes 2003). As a result of this governmental critique, commercial mass media outlets have been constructed as the 'objective' source of news, free from any hint of government propaganda – even though the media have eluded any meaningful critique of the economic forces behind societal structures, that is, the very economic forces that benefit multinational media conglomerates.

Over time, citizens inevitably develop an interest in tales of governmental largesse and what can be seen as a blatant disregard of taxpayer funding. The media conglomerates then continue their focus on governmental issues as a response to citizen demands for transparency while examinations of the private sector remain scant. This destructive cycle of commercially based news practices results in the very real dearth of meaningful fiscal reporting that preceded the economic disaster that was to come in September 2009. No investigative journalism from either the alternative or mainstream press systemically exposed the extravagance and unethical behaviour of corporations, which began the sub-prime disaster that led to billions and billions of dollars of losses from 401(k) plans, individual retirement accounts and personal savings. Such disregard for examining the economic behaviour of corporations is intrinsically tied to the vested economic interests of media companies. Executive producer of Globalvision, Danny Schechter, recently said that contemporary business reporting offers very little context or explanation because 'many of our major media companies don't operate in a world apart from these (economic) pressures' (Schechter 2006). However, many smaller, independent media are also feeling these economic pressures, perhaps even more directly than those in the mainstream media because they do not have any economic safety net that might present itself in a conglomerated ownership structure. Reductions in editorial budgets across the media spectrum result in heightened commercial pressures everywhere.

Journalism as an institution was created on behalf of the enlightenment of civil society. Without an informed citizenry, 'the cost to society in the form of ignorant, lousy governance, and less fulfilled individuals arguably is immensely

high, economically, culturally, and politically' (McChesney 2004: 204). The converse is also true. Provocative, investigative journalism informs society and produces positive externalities – informed citizens who have valuable input in policy, business and local governance. However, a commercially focused, multinational conglomerate media system is not capable of generating these positive externalities as they run counter to the mission and purpose of their existence. Any for-profit business must have its economic returns as the fundamental focus of everyday operations. Commercially minded alternative and mainstream media are no different. Economic incentives drive operational behaviour and resulting content.

With very little funding and a mandate that has moved away from citizen issues, media increasingly respond to easy entertainment stories rather than investigative work. David Simon (2009), a reporter from *The Washington Post*, provides a devastating illustration of what can happen when journalism no longer has the resources to cover the news nor the inclination to expose corruption. Simon recalls 20 years prior when he reported on crime in Baltimore and relied on judges to support his right for information when confronting a recalcitrant police force. He recounts how the police feared the press and their power to report corruption. In a blatant example of weak journalism, he highlights a recent case of a police officer who shot a citizen and no major alternative or mainstream press covered the story. He eloquently writes, 'In an American city, a police officer with the authority to take human life can now do so in the shadows, while his higher-ups can claim that this is necessary not to avoid public accountability, but to mitigate against a nonexistent wave of threats. And the last remaining daily newspaper in town no longer has the manpower, the expertise or the institutional memory to challenge any of it' (Simon 2009: B01). He points out that the failure was not only on the part of mainstream media but also on the part of the blogging community and citizen journalism. All ignored a subject that should be of vital interest to citizens. Simon (2009) cites the media conglomerate profiteering of the 80s and 90s, the self-destruction of newspapers with the rise of the Internet, and the commercial mandate embedded within the entire media spectrum, as the responsible agents for the present meltdown in journalistic responsibility.

As this example illustrates, the conglomerated ownership model within a capitalistic media environment has huge implications for resulting news content. Commercialism influences not only what stories are told but how they are told as well. As Carragee and Roefs (2004) have argued, there is a relationship between media frames and 'broader issues of political and social power' (2004: 214). It is the endemic capitalistic structure of media frame sponsors and those within the media who frame content. Although capitalism has been implicated as a central component to ownership influence, academic scholarship has largely overlooked comparisons in ownership models of community newspapers. This is an important omission as community newspapers, in particular, play a very credible

(Armstrong & Collins 2009) and important role in individuals' understanding of their immediate social political world (Glascock 2004). If corporate ownership influences content through propaganda, a lack of attention to local issues and homogenous representations of what is most certainly a diverse world replete with distinctively different peoples, ideas and perspectives, then this would likely have a profound impact on how citizens engage with and understand their own community networks and local political decision-making. Small, independent community newspapers and websites are slowly disappearing in the rush for conglomeration. The influence of ownership in the mainstream press, while decidedly complex, has received the overwhelming bulk of attention in academic scholarship, but little is known about the extent of corporate ownership into community media and the kind of resulting content that citizens receive about the political decisions being made in their own neighbourhoods.

A study of webpage ownership versus content

This study examines two randomly selected online community news websites owned by News Corporation and two online community news sites within the same geographical region that are independently owned. This resulted in *The Brooklyn Paper*, which is owned by News Corporation that manages the Community Newspaper Group, which runs *The Brooklyn Paper*, *Bronx Times-Reporter*, *Brooklyn Courier-Life* and the *Queens Time Ledger*. The second community newspaper owned by News Corporation that was included in this study was the *Melbourne Leader*, which is one of a consortium of 33 suburban papers in Melbourne that are all owned by the media conglomerate. The independent community newspapers used for inclusion in this study were found through Google searches for 'independent community newspapers' in both Brooklyn and Melbourne. In the case of Brooklyn, *Brooklyn Eagle* appeared to be the only independent news site in the area that was published in English, so it was included for this study. It is owned by a local publisher J. Dozier Hasty, who also publishes the *Bay Ridge Eagle*. *The Dandenong Star* was the Melbourne news site included in this study. It is owned by Star News Group, which is an independent family newspaper company in the Melbourne region that runs 23 community newspapers in the area and is the main competition to the News Corporations *Leader* community newspapers. The only other listing in the first 20 Google results for 'independent community newspaper in Melbourne' that was not part of the *Leader* newspapers or the Star News Group news sites was for the *Melbourne Observer*, which did not have an online component and therefore was not suitable for study.

Content was collated by creating a randomized constructed week. Coders selected content over a period of 7 weeks and each week they gathered content

on a different day of the week (i.e. during week 1, they gathered content on Monday; during week 2, they gathered content on Tuesday etc.). It was determined at the beginning of the study that 10 randomly selected articles would be chosen from each website on each day of analysis. This number was selected because in some cases, these websites did not have more than 10 new articles on their pages for the day. This methodological approach resulted in 280 articles; however, 20 articles were removed because it was found that in the randomized selection process, these pages were included but they were not actually articles. Each article from these four websites was the unit of analysis for study. The qualitative content analysis was completed with two coders who were asked to examine variables drawn from previous research examining influences on media content. After reviewing the literature, 20 variables were created for examination.

An uncertain influence

The relationship between the type of media (mainstream or alternative) and interest towards elites and non-elites was significant. The most pronounced value difference was that mainstream community content was found to be of interest to both elites and non-elites far more than would be expected by chance alone. Sixty-four per cent of mainstream content was found to be of interest to both elites and non-elites, whereas alternative community content was statistically much less likely to produce content of interest to both elites and non-elites. Mainstream media relied on non-elite sources more than would be expected by chance alone and relied on sources without specific citation far less than would be expected by chance.

One of the many examples of content that was found to be of interest to both elites and non-elites came from the corporately owned *Melbourne Leader*, which discussed a proposed revamp for a Melbourne market on 6 December 2010. The article asked locals in the headline to ‘have your say’. The text quoted Councillor Peter Clarke who detailed his plans for the changes, but also outlined how the development could impact the local community through ‘increased traffic’. A local neighbourhood representative said, ‘any overhaul should be respectful of the market’s heritage’, to which a government councillor responded that there would be ‘a lot more green open space’. There was extensive discussion in the article of a ‘public-private partnership’ in developing the market and repeated statements that councillors are seeking citizen’s input into the project. The article ends by stating, ‘Do you support a major revamp of the Queen Victoria Market? Tell us below’. However, there were no stated comments left from citizens concerning the project.

A contrasting example comes from the independent *Brooklyn Eagle*, in an article titled ‘Marty Presses for an Apple Store There’ on 6 December 2010.

The article reviews New York City's Request for Proposal to turn two floors of a municipal building into retail outlets featuring an Apple Store. Borough President Marty Markowitz is quoted as saying it is 'one of the best retail locations in the city'. Without citation, the reporters state 'the building is served by 14 subway lines and many bus lines, making it an ideal location'. Assemblywoman Joan Millman is ebullient when she is quoted as saying that the project is the 'apple of my eye' – clearly drawing a metaphorical comparison to the Apple retail store. There is no investigative discussion as to the repercussions of such development and no consideration of how citizens might respond to this new retail centre except for one mention at the end of the article, which reads that Deputy Mayor for Operations Stephen Goldsmith stated 'we have at least 1,000 empty desks in the city's offices ... it wouldn't be difficult to find space for the displaced employees'. The possibility of the impact on citizens is dismissed as quickly as it was raised.

A near majority of content was found to have no propaganda present. The relationship between outlets and propaganda was significant with mainstream community sites addressing citizen and government concerns equally more often than would be expected by chance alone. Mainstream community media was also much less likely than alternative sites to create content that could not be viewed as either pro- or anti-propagandistic. An example of rather anti-propagandistic coverage comes from the *Melbourne Leader*, which led on 23 December 2010 with the headline 'East Melbourne Bike Lanes' Costs Adding Up'. The article uses terms like 'splash' to describe how money was spent, suggesting that fiscal responsibility was decidedly lax and the government was at fault for such reckless spending. No quotes were drawn from individuals who supported the bike lanes, which were described as 'cuckoo' by one person. The article states that 'many local businesses and residents remain unhappy with the design' and one citizen called the project 'absurd'. There was no instance at all of a bike rider who perhaps was satisfied with the project. In this instance, citizens are decidedly unhappy with government actions and the local newspaper is utilized as a conduit for that dissatisfaction. No emphasis is made to better understand the reasoning why the government decided to fund these bike lanes. This repeated distance between those against the bike lanes and government representatives may 'suggest preoccupations within the particular discursive context, and which therefore add up to a representation of the world for a culture or for a group which holds status within a culture' (Matheson 2005: 22). In this instance, the (absurd, cuckoo) government holds far weaker status than those who have an obvious reasoned stance against the lanes and therefore stronger social status within their community.

Coverage that was coded as heavily favouring the government, or propaganda, was found on 2 December 2010 in a *Dandenong Star* article titled 'Mayor Makes Good'. The piece restates that the mayor is 'thrilled at the prospect of a new civic precinct', which would have 'huge environmental benefits as its

five-star energy rating would reduce greenhouse gas emissions'. The article is exclusively complementary with no counterpoint to the possible environmental costs of building in the first place, or the merits of the project itself.

Almost all of the media sampled for this study had advertising present on their sites yet almost none had requests for donations. The content itself was generally seen to not address commercial concerns directly. However, the relationship between media outlet and commercial concerns remained significant with mainstream media outlets equally addressing commercial and individual concerns more than would be expected by chance alone. Also, mainstream outlets had fewer articles seen as not applicable to commercial interests than would be expected by chance. On 22 December 2010, Alex Rush from *The Brooklyn Paper* wrote that 'Brooklyn leads the "chain" gang' referring to the 1,330 corporate stores within Brooklyn. The article begins quite positively in regards to chain ownership expansion stating that the area has '43 million subway riders each year, 150,000 shoppers ... any national retailer that doesn't set up here is missing a great opportunity'. The reporter relies upon this quote that highlights the inherent mutual benefits of chains to a community. The choices available to the retailer are few because there is an obvious gain to be made here. If chain retailers do not open up their shops, then they would obviously *miss an opportunity*. Therefore, the benefits are clear and must be taken. There is no actual other choice. The reporter goes on to cite opinion polls showing widespread support for a proposed Walmart store in the area, but then quickly changes the articles' tone when he notes that there is resistance 'from the mom and pop businesspeople they shove aside'. Here, the choice to state that these businesspeople are *shoved* aside demonstrates how social forces engage the text (Hodge & Kress 1993). Within any news text, there are limitless linguistic options available for description. Yet some are inevitably chosen more than others. These discursive approaches are used, presumably, for a news outlet to relate better to their audience (Reah 2002). If that is the case in this example, then the linguistic choices are purposive and telling. The article began with positive coverage of the financial benefits that these national chains bring to the local economy. However, the article ends with a statement from Sal Casaccio whose independent pizzeria was evicted to make space for a national burger chain. He states, 'chain stores can't outdo true Brooklyn mom-and-pop service'.

The relationship between media outlet and original content was highly significant with alternative community media drawing on content already reported elsewhere much more than would be expected by chance. Alternative community media regurgitated content from both mainstream and independent source relatively evenly, but with slightly more content coming from other mainstream sources. Nearly half of independent community media content did not have a byline on the article, so it was impossible to ascertain if the reporter was relied upon repeatedly for content or if the story was the product of a

unique, individual reporting effort. A stated reporter beat was far more likely to be found in the mainstream press than the independent media sampled.

A near majority of content across these community websites was found to be focused on public issues. Investigative content was more likely to be found in mainstream community media, and mainstream media were far more likely to report issues thematically over a long period of time. Independent media were more likely to have content that was largely superficial or episodic. It is important to note that independent media were more likely to report stories where the time of origin was unknown, but far less likely to report stories that were obviously thematic and over a prolonged period. A sample of investigative pieces includes the history of murder-suicides in the Windsor Terrace community; the possibility of dredging Gravesend Bay where unexploded bombs have been since 1954; the debate between charter schools and state education in Fort Greene; how graffiti-art, and tagging, has grown within the Melbourne city district; and the history of how a Brooklyn neighbourhood has come to memorialize a horrific plane accident in 1960. However, superficial/episodic content, rather than in-depth/thematic content, was the most likely type of content found (75.8 per cent) overall across all media types.

There was no relationship between an emphasis on local content or corporate interests embedded into content and outlet type. This was because a strong majority of all content was overwhelmingly local in its focus across the sample. The consistency of coverage was evident in how many media stories were found across a variety of outlets and the mentions of social movements in media content. Further, content that might be more applicable to minorities was also found to be insignificant and very consistent across the sample, with an almost equal weighting across mainstream and independent sources.

The bias of a media outlet was much more apparent in the mainstream press than in independent media. The independent press were more likely to have their opinion be 'not obvious' in articles than the mainstream press. This relationship was highly significant. Bias was found when evocative language was used outside of direct quotes or when one particular perspective was highlighted repeatedly through sources and quotes without any meaningful counterpoint raised.

Repeated invitations to communicate were more likely within the mainstream press than independent media, whose instances of repeated invitations to communicate were so low that adjusted residual scores could not be generated. Mainstream media were also more likely to have the standard format for feedback, such as comments to the author, than independent media. Independent media were far more likely to have no invitation at all for readers to communicate than the mainstream press, whose instances of no invitations to communicate were too low to calculate adjusted residual scores.

Independent media were more likely to present no sensationalism than the mainstream press, which were statistically much more likely to rely on

sensationalistic reporting techniques than independent media. However, overall, a majority of all of media content had some level of sensationalism detected. Examples of sensationalism abounded across the media spectrum. One such example was found on 19 January 2011 in an article titled “‘Tobacco’ Woes! Suit Says State Lied to Feds to Privatize Park Warehouse’. This headline alone suggests a high degree of sensationalism in content. The use of an exclamation point and the word ‘lied’ are both highly evocative discursive choices designed to shock the reader and hopefully sustain their attention long enough to read the entire article. As Matheson (2005) has argued, there are a range of possible vocabulary items that can always be otherwise utilized. For example, this headline would have strikingly different emotive results if written as ‘Lawsuit Alleges Misconduct in Park Warehouse Privatization’.

This study, much like the other case studies highlighted in this text, suggests that what we generally hold to be truths about alternative and mainstream media need to be reconsidered. In this examination of a constructed week of online content between two community sites – one set owned by media conglomerate Rupert Murdoch and the other set owned by independent owners – much of the previously accepted research surrounding the distinctions between alternative and mainstream media was refuted. Before reviewing these conclusions, it is important to state that an obvious limitation of this study is its small sample size. Much more work, which examines a larger body of content, is needed to examine remaining differences and overlapping similarities between alternative and mainstream media. However, this nascent research further problematizes previous studies which define alternative media by its distance from the mainstream. In many cases, the distance between the two forms of media was non-existent and in others, mainstream media actually swung in a direction opposite to what research would suggest.

In relation to alternative media, mainstream media presented content that was more balanced between elites and non-elites, with a higher reliance on non-elite sources. Mainstream media relied more on coverage that was balanced between citizen and government concerns, seen as neither pro- nor anti-propagandistic, and balanced between commercial and individual concerns. Mainstream media were more likely than the alternative press in this sample to produce content originating from a reporter on a repeated ‘beat’ and rely on investigative reporting with thematic coverage. Mainstream media also produced more bias in coverage and sensationalism as well as repeated invitations to communicate. In relation to mainstream media, alternative media presented content that was more lopsided in balance between elites and non-elites, with a higher reliance on elite sources. Alternative media relied more on sources without citation, content that was originally created elsewhere, superficial reporting practices and episodic coverage. Alternative media were also more likely than the mainstream press to be non-biased and non-sensational. However, they also had almost no meaningful invitations to communicate with their readers. Both mainstream and alternative community

media relied heavily on advertising, yet almost none addressed commercial concerns directly in content. A near majority of all content focused on public, local issues and there was no difference between the alternative and mainstream press in regards to mentions of social movements or applicability to minorities.

When these results are collated and compared with the completed narrative analysis, an ideological identity emerges which is quite distinct from the commonly held didactic positions of corporate versus independent positioning. All of the media in this sample re-presented the cultural value of localism as a 'unity of experience and action' (Atkinson 2006: 260). This alone would represent a unique finding among the literature examining mainstream and alternative media. However, it was the mainstream press that expanded both communal and individual responses to progressive, participatory action. Mainstream community media urged communication with readers and depended more on personalized, native reporting that relied on self-disclosure – a key quality of alternative media as defined by previous scholars. The producers of these mainstream community outlets drew upon investigative, thematic reporting and non-elitist perspectives to create narrative fragments that supported a non-corporate ideology.

It is important to highlight that some aspects of a commercial ideology were more readily present in mainstream community media, such as bias and sensationalism. However, that was overshadowed with the conflation of findings across both alternative and mainstream media and the distinctly 'independent' ideologies constructed within the narrative fragments of the mainstream press. The motives for such an ideology remain unclear. Within a capitalistic system, one cannot discount a financial imperative, which would suggest that, at least in regards to community media, independent ideologies may 'sell' better and are therefore celebrated by the mainstream press. Mainstream media have historically been far better at discovering hidden markets and finding unique communication models to exploit them. The evidence of independent ideologies in mainstream community media may simply represent accurate market research on the part of the mainstream. That possibility must be considered given that this study was confined only to community media and any conclusions cannot be made outside of this realm. However, this nascent research does suggest that further study is needed to examine the complicated, and at times, contradictory media spectrum as well as the contested role of ownership in dictating the differences between alternative and mainstream media.