

Big Media Behaving Badly

America's biggest media companies are on a roll this month.

Usually fancy new gadgets — not old-school media giants — are the focus of the Consumer Electronics Show. But this year the talk at CES was all about CBS.

On the last day of the big electronics trade show, the technology site CNET was ready to announce its best-of-show awards. The winning gadget was a new digital video recorder (DVR) made by the satellite company DISH.

However, CBS owns CNET, and CBS is in the midst of a messy legal battle with DISH. So at the last minute the DISH DVR [disappeared from the awards](#). In fact, the Verge [reported](#) that CBS management forced CNET staff to re-vote on the best gadget award.

At the time, CNET released a statement that suggested CBS' action reflected an ongoing company policy: "We will no longer be reviewing products manufactured by companies with which we are in litigation with respect to such product."

This is one of the many problems that arise with huge media conglomerates: They often use business interests as an excuse for interfering with news content.

And sometimes the problem isn't a company telling newsrooms what they can't cover, but telling what they must address.

Joe Flint of the *L.A. Times* recently chronicled two examples of big vertically integrated media companies using their news programs as marketing arms. When Comcast bought NBC, it promised not to meddle

with the longtime broadcaster's news programming. But Flint [states that NBC](#) has become "the most aggressive" company when it comes to using news operations to push entertainment offerings.

Flint points to a number of cases in which NBC used *Rock Center* and *Meet the Press* as opportunities to push sitcoms and late-night comedy personalities like Jay Leno. He also notes that increasingly news anchors like Brian Williams are showing up in shows like *30 Rock* and the new *1600 Penn*. In the end, this only hurts the news, Flint writes: "Not only does it hurt the integrity of the news division, there's also no proof it helps boost ratings."

Just days after taking NBC to task, Flint [turned his attention](#) to ABC, where *Nightline* ran an extended feature on the network's Miss America Pageant. "When it comes to networks risking the credibility of their news units by using them to promote their own entertainment shows," Flint writes, "that horse left the barn a long time ago. But now the horse is on its fifth lap around the farm."

Newsrooms today are working with limited resources, Flint argues, and whenever staff time and energy are used to promote sitcoms and pageants it takes resources away from coverage of more important topics and current events.

Here's the kicker: The media giants discussed here all infringed on their news operations on the same day — Jan. 11. Let's hope the rest of the year gets better from here.

Curious to know who owns the media? Check out Free Press's [interactive media ownership charts](#).