

On the Comcast/Time-Warner Cable merger

For a long time Congress and the FCC allowed massive consolidation so that now there are only about 6 companies that produce everything that is broadcast. They are powerful politically, because they can ignore critics, determine who gets seen and heard, and who gets elected. It has created a small number of oligarchs with very deep pockets who have especially good access to Congress and want power. The public pays a heavy price for this. Studies show that Congress responds to the wealthy.

According to one study, U.S. ranks last in hard news and found that Americans are "especially uninformed about international public affairs." Scandinavians, who benefit from well-funded public media, are best informed and, not unrelated, best educated. The U.S, according to Reporters Without Borders, has dropped to number 46 in press freedom. Check the schedule for the learning channel to see what you can learn. There is shrinking media diversity. The Post Office, which used to be an important media channel, is now threatened. Downsized journalism is now inadequate for a functioning democracy.

Jaron Lanier, in an excerpt from *You Are Not a Gadget* (January 2010, Harper's Magazine):

"If you want to know what's really going on in a society or ideology, follow the money. If money is flowing to advertising instead of to musicians, journalists, and artists, then a society is more concerned with manipulation than with truth or beauty. If content is worthless, then people will start to become empty-headed and content-less. The combination of hive mind and advertising has resulted in a new kind of social contract. The basic idea of this contract is that authors, journalists, musicians, and artists are encouraged to treat the fruits of their intellects and imaginations as fragments to be given without pay to the hive mind. Reciprocity takes the form of self-promotion. Culture is to become precisely nothing but advertising."

Media, together with copyright law on steroids has been strangling culture. Any really free market must have many healthy competitors, but US law has been crafted so that consolidation kills media competition. A deregulated oligopoly is not a free market. The public has nothing to say about content or soaring cable prices, and has no way to seriously oppose shrinking of the public sector. Cable bundling forces consumers to buy massive amounts of unwanted content, and no way to push for quality offerings.

Net neutrality is strongly threatened by conglomerates. Earlier this year a federal court threw out the FCC's Net Neutrality rules, internet service providers like AT&T, Time Warner Cable and Verizon can legally block us from accessing information online. You might have to pay extra to watch Netflix or listen to Spotify, or access other sites in your Internet package. The internet is important public infrastructure, and is at risk from the privatizers.

Who is being served by this ? Congress allowed consolidation to benefit oligarch funders, not the public. Since there is little discussion that policy should benefit people, the popularity of cable companies is likely even lower than that of Congress.

Ralph Nader commented in 1991:

"The people are the landlords of the public airwaves, and the broadcast companies are the tenants. Under the present, inverted system, the tenants pay no rent to the landlords, decide who says what on TV and radio, and control the FCC, which is the supposed leasing agent for the landlords. All attempts to use the tools of the 1934 act's public-interest standard have been rebuffed by the broadcasters as alleged infringements of their First Amendment rights. These attempts include efforts to improve children's programming, to provide rights of reply, and to hold stations to broadcasting diverse

viewpoints on important controversial issues."

John McCain as Chair of the Senate Commerce Committee controlled the FCC's budget, commented that only the public was not represented in the Telecommunication Act. In a scandal, not much recognized by the press, McCain intervened for Paxon to buy a PBS station in Pittsburgh. The very same Pax (now ION) owns our local, New London, Ct. TV station. It has almost no local offerings except at 6:00 AM two days of the week. Otherwise it broadcasts religious propaganda and old movies for advertisers. That's the fruit of consolidation: no local news, no local accountability, and few local jobs.

McCain also worked to get Michael Powell (Colin's son) appointed as FCC Chairman. Michael explained to a legal forum that

"the night after I was sworn in, I waited for a visit from the angel of the public interest. I waited all night, but she did not come. And, in fact, five months into this job, I still have had no divine awakening and no one has issued me my public-interest crystal ball."

True to his word, the FCC does the will of the industry it is supposed to regulate, and little for the public. Former FCC staffer Adam Candeub, now a law professor at Michigan State University, says senior managers at the Federal Communications Commission ordered that "every last piece" of a draft study that suggested greater concentration of media ownership would hurt local TV news coverage be destroyed. "The whole project was just stopped, end of discussion,"

For his work at the FCC, Michael Powell was hired as the head of the Cable TV Association. That pretty much sums up the industry's contemptuous attitude for the public.

There is not much of a public option. PBS has been playing British programs, but its news is also in thrall to the oligarchs. The cable industry is working mightily to downsize or eliminate public access that could save them regulation, expense, and they get to convert the facility to profitable use producing advertising and their own content. In California, Public Access was closed down without warning. <http://articles.latimes.com/2009/jan/05/entertainment/et-publicaccess5>

Industry consolidation has been one of the strong accelerants of income inequality. But Media consolidation, aside from that, presents a specially serious risk to democracy and many other American values.

It is in the interest of oligarchs who want political control to further game the system and their strong bias is rightward. For example, AOL cooked their books to put themselves in position to merge with Time-Warner and then steered CNN to the right. CNN has been Foxified.

Rupert Murdoch owns a worldwide media empire of newspapers, radio, satellite, and television channels including Fox. He employed many of the most strident 'personalities' delivering misinformation: Glenn Beck, Bill O'Reilly, Sarah Palin, Mike Huckabee, Newt Gingrich are highly paid Fox News political analysts. So are Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity. Almost every Republican Presidential contender has been on the Fox payroll. These are the people that drive our toxic politics and nurture the tea party movement. They are the leading source of disinformation about climate change. The loudest voices for war in Iraq and Iran, to bust unions and cut 'entitlements'. PIPA polls determined that Fox News listeners have more misconceptions than any other network. David Frum said "Republicans originally thought that Fox worked for us, and now we are discovering we work for Fox".

A British panel concluded Murdoch is not fit to run a major company. After scandal in Britain, Murdoch was barred from Canada. Canadians have an excellent law that broadcasters are not allowed

to lie. When Stephen Harper moved to abolish the anti-lying provision of the Radio Act, Canadians rose up to oppose him fearing that their tradition of honest non-partisan news would be replaced by the toxic, overtly partisan, biased and dishonest news coverage familiar to American citizens who listen to Fox News and talk radio. Harper's proposal was timed to facilitate the launch of a new right-wing network, "Sun TV News" which Canadians call "Fox News North." (Suzie Madrack)

Although there has been extensive coverage of devastating storms, there has been almost no discussion of climate change on broadcast television, and the little that there was included almost NO climate scientists. (Tennessee Congresswoman Blackburn appeared on Meet the Press today (2/16/14) dismissed climate change as an issue. She proved how important it is to remove Republicans from control of the Congress.)

Congress willingness to allow massive media consolidation is very bad policy for climate, culture, education, democracy, American values, and for the public. Especially since Citizen's United, cash flooded media can strongly influence who gets elected. As Lawrence Lessig points out in his book "Republic Lost": Congress is accountable to the funders, not the people. The funders want media consolidation, so Congress will probably allow it. Say hello to further consolidated media, and goodbye to the Republic...and the planet.

Although policy decisions almost always favor the oligarchs, the burden of proof should be on Comcast to show the proposed merger has significant public benefit. In my opinion, given the constant misinformation that dominates the airwaves, the systematic betrayal of technology, the planet must be destroyed for corporate profit. Humanity is doomed.