

Media Ownership Project

A Collaborative Research and Education Project

Introduction

The Media Ownership Project will promote informed public discussion about the growing concentration of media ownership and the impact of that trend on democracy. The MOP (if you'll pardon the acronym) is a collaborative project involving researchers and activists at several universities and organizations and it maximizes the effectiveness of the internet for just such a joint effort.

The Media Education Foundation provides the home base for certain research, communication, and dissemination aspects of this project, but its success depends on our effort to bring together the work of a number of leading scholars and critics of media ownership concentration. It bravely seeks, in other words, to break out of the fragmented world of individual research fiefdoms and to use the communications technology now available to build a community of scholars and activists united in their common concern and interest in media ownership trends and the impacts of those trends both on democracy in the United States and on cultures and political systems throughout the globe.

The project envisions the following programmatic steps:

- Build a multi-centered, but linked data pool of existing research on media ownership.
- Conduct and support research to fill in the gaps in knowledge about media ownership.
- Make media ownership information available on a World Wide Web site.
- Publish posters, comic books, teacher guides, and other materials to introduce students and the general public to the issue of media ownership and its implications for democracy.
- Sponsor a conference to elevate on the public policy agenda concerns about the concentration of media ownership.

Rationale

The Conglomeratization of Media Ownership

The media shape our culture. They control the stories we tell and hear about ourselves as a society. They define national identity and even local community. They shape perceptions about everything from crime and punishment to gender roles and fashion. Should a handful of corporate media owners be given the unchallenged power to operate as what George Gerbner calls a "private ministry of culture?" When Ben Bagdikian wrote his first edition of *Media Monopoly* in 1983, he identified about 50 companies that controlled the bulk of U.S. media. In his 1992 edition, he notes the number had dwindled to less than two dozen. Today, according to Robert McChesney in *Corporate Media and*

the Threat to Democracy (1997) five conglomerates dominate the ownership of media, followed by a second tier of less than two dozen corporate owners. We see the trend toward greater concentration of media ownership as a threat to democracy both in the United States and around the world, and that is why we have launched the Media Ownership Project.

Recently, there was an *op ed* piece in a Springfield, Massachusetts newspaper, written by a former board member of a local cable company. He was complaining that the company had stolen broadcast hours away from the only local Spanish-language station in order to carry Red Sox games. But his larger concern was that the cable company, once based in the community and subject to community feedback, has now been bought by a distant corporation which seems inaccessible and little interested in the opinions of local viewers. Even this small exception to the control of the airwaves, community-based cable, is under assault by the tidal wave of private monopoly control. And the most recent chance to preserve funding for public space through an auction of the digital spectrum was turned instead into a massive giveaway of a rich public resource to the broadcasting industry.

Our principal sources of news, information, and entertainment are becoming more and more concentrated in fewer and fewer corporate hands. The case above illustrates the important connection between the conglomeratization of media ownership and the threat to access for the widely diverse voices that make up our communities. The same story is being played out in communities and homes across America in various forms. More channels, but owned by fewer companies, has brought more homogeneity and fewer voices, not the promised greater diversity and range of viewpoints. Those paying closest attention to this concentration of media ownership are, at present, media scholars and activists, industry investors, and those involved in community cable who perceive threats both to local influence. Increasingly, however, those working for social change in a variety of arenas are beginning to see the connection between the ability to present alternative views and the concentration of media ownership. TCI President John Malone, for instance, has begun to maneuver progressive programming off its cable selections and to replace it with conservative programming. Organizations working to reform the criminal justice system find themselves working against a public legislative environment that has been shaped into a virtual electronic lynch mob by commercial media's ability to sensationalize crime and create what Stuart Hall calls a "moral panic" out of proportion to the real threat.

Whether programming and news slanting is outwardly right-wing or not, the commercial nature of television has led to content that has widespread negative social effects and, thus, aggravates fundamental social problems. Yet, the media are thought of by many as an amorphous set of images that can't be identified easily with corporate bodies or held accountable for their content. In many ways, the media aren't "thought of" at all; their content is merely assumed to be a natural part of our environment. So as long as the news anchors are the familiar faces we welcome into our living room every night, we don't consider whether news reports on the environment, arms sales, industrial issues,

and other matters is affected by the fact that two large industrial giants, GE and Westinghouse, own two of the major networks, or that another is owned by a massive entertainment, theme park, and publishing empire, the Disney Company.

While most discussions on the media focus on content, there have recently been sea changes in the nature of ownership and in the fundamental philosophies underlying public media regulatory policy, changes which will have a direct impact on both content and access in every form of communications medium.

The regulatory climate has changed dramatically in the past two decades, just at the time that new communications technologies make new forms and interconnections possible. In the name of stimulating competition, mergers have been permitted that the Federal Communications Commission would have rejected out of hand (and did) 20 years ago. And those mergers are leading not to more competition but to increasing concentration and monopoly.

The proprietary nature of the media is shifting rapidly and profoundly in an anti-democratic direction, both domestically and globally. Entire nations, which had developed national communication policies to serve development and educational needs for instance now find themselves facing the same loss of control that the local community cable advisory board member voiced in the story cited above. Images produced far away and the commercial purposes they serve dominate the world's air waves. Yet, there is no central repository and distributor of information on the global patterns and specific facts of media ownership today.

That is the gap which the Media Ownership Project hopes to fill. First, it seeks to pool existing research and then to bridge gaps in knowledge on who owns what media. Second, and perhaps more importantly, it will carry out an aggressive dissemination effort to get that information to those who most need a "truth-in-ownership" label -- the media user.

It is not terribly surprising that media outlets themselves have done a poor job of informing the public of who owns their news and who sells their time to advertisers. The most extensive coverage of this trend toward concentration of media ownership has appeared in the pages of *The Nation*, spearheaded by the work of Mark Crispin Miller and his research team at John Hopkins. The gap in mainstream public awareness can be addressed with an imaginative and extensive dissemination strategy, made possible in part by new media such as the Internet.

The rationale for the project lies in our assumption that an informed citizenry exposed to a diverse range of information, imagery, and opinion is essential to a vibrant democracy. Our purpose is to fill a gap in public information about the institutional communication web which shapes our perceptions and actions in our civic world and which greatly influences values, beliefs, and expectations in the social and cultural realms.

Structural shifts in media ownership have, for some time, drawn notice and commentary from specialists in the field. The implications of the increasing centralization of media ownership for civil society must, however, insinuate itself more deeply and broadly into public discourse. It is our intention to bring together scholars and observers in related fields to discuss the social and political implications of media ownership patterns. But our primary purpose is to draw more people into the conversation about the nature of their media. The recent reform of U.S. communications regulatory statutes in the absence of broad and informed public debate is a good example of how major structural changes which affect our entire civil process and quality of governance can be enacted without the informed involvement of those affected by it.

To broaden the discussion, however, requires education. And it is the central purpose of this project to make this discussion accessible to a much wider public. A plan for dissemination is discussed below. But the principle guiding our work is that knowledge of the ownership structure of the media must be a fundamental aspect of the effort of MEF and other organizations to educate a more media-literate citizenry. Informed consumers and participants in our mediated society can and must be more aware of the sources of the stories we are told, and they must be actively and intelligently involved in shaping communications policy to guarantee wider access to the media through which those stories are told.

Expected Outcomes

This project will measure its success by its ability to place on both the specialist's and the public's agenda concern about and action on the dangers of media ownership concentration in light of the media's impact and role in our society.

Specific outcomes will be:

- A data base, available on-line, which will give researchers across the globe instant access to detailed information on media ownership
- Curriculum support materials for high school through graduate school levels, bolstering units on who owns the media and why it matters
- Enlightened discussion among the public and policymakers about the relevance of anti-trust and other earlier regulatory principles to the issue of media monopoly
- Pressure toward greater disclosure of conflicts of interest in media news and feature reports

- Maximal use of the Internet and World Wide Web, combined with state-of-the-art graphic presentation tools to collect and disseminate information on media ownership
- Structured dialogue with media professionals and corporate officers and trustees about the impact and implications of concentrated media ownership for the content and nature of news and entertainment programming, diversity in information, and ethical and professional concerns for media professionals and owners
- An enhanced institutional capacity to provide ownership information to those teaching in the areas of social studies, civics and government, and media literacy at the high school level, and in related disciplines at the college and university level.

Plan of Action

Research

There have been solid foundational beginnings in research on the moving target of mass media ownership. Ben Bagdikian, with each edition of his *Media Monopoly*, has provided the most comprehensive overview of media ownership patterns. Mark Crispin Miller at Johns Hopkins and Robert McChesney at the University of Wisconsin have both assembled information on ownership concentration in the broadcast and entertainment industries and have authored a number of articles and publications based on that research. Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky have, for years, included an analysis of ownership in their critical treatises on the “manufacturing of consent.” Susan Douglas detailed the evolution of ownership patterns in radio. Sut Jhally’s work has provided a conceptual framework for understanding the link between advertising and the messages conveyed in the media. Nolan Bowie has done important work on an analysis of the legal and regulatory structure of telecommunications. George Gerbner and the Cultural Indicators Project at the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg School for Communication have compiled data for three decades on the structure and ownership of the broadcast media and on the impact of media upon society. Brian Murphy of IGCNEWS has compiled data for years on the global ownership of cyberspace. Leonard Rifas developed the first comprehensive landscape map of media ownership. Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting has researched and published specific exposes on the connection between media ownership and politicized coverage of news. The Institute for Alternative Journalism has provided alternative news sources to journalists and has convened the Media and Democracy Congress, bringing together media activists, scholars, and journalists to, among other things, seek ways to address the growing concentration of media ownership. Justin Lewis has demonstrated the connection between the dominant ideologies of media

owners and the messages audiences receive. Other studies, including work by Chip Berlet, have examined the use of the media in the political ascendancy of the political right in the United States.

Important discussions about launching a public awareness campaign on media ownership have taken place in several forums during 1996 and 1997 (the Media and Democracy Congress, the Cultural Environment Movement's founding conference, the Free the Media conference in New York, and in continuing discussions of a working group on the issue comprising representatives of more than 20 organizations). The Media Ownership Project will work closely with all scholars and others who have conducted ownership research. There is no reason to duplicate work when so much new work is needed. The project will initiate, lead, and coordinate extensive and on-going research to fill in gaps of knowledge and to keep current what we know about the ownership structure of the media, primarily in the United States, but globally as well. That research will include descriptions of formal ownership structures and interlocking directorates, as well as profiles of controlling holding companies and stockholders and CEOs. It will provide a map and links to sites of related research as they are identified.

The Media Ownership Project will, perhaps most importantly, provide a **central repository (including links to data banks located elsewhere)** and a **coordinated dissemination strategy** for information on media ownership. The Media Ownership Project will assemble researchers who have been working in this area (both in person and on-line), collate their data, initiate research to fill information gaps, and assure information is kept up to date. Much of the research and communication among the team will be through the Internet, though face-to-face strategy meetings will be necessary at the outset of the project.

The beauty of the Internet for a project such as this is that it makes collaboration and access possible in ways never before available. No researcher, for instance, need feel he or she is giving over original work to some other organization without due recognition. The Internet makes it possible to largely eradicate such "turf" concerns where they might impede collaboration. The Internet is non-geographic and decentralized. The data base, or data bases, could be maintained on a server at IGC, a university, or a center in Santiago, Chile. Researchers can access and submit material easily; credit can be noted for specific information where appropriate. Every organization involved can be easily linked through a Web Site at the touch of a key. One site could access the main data base. A hot button could link to a source of updated articles on ownership issues. Another click on the mouse could call up action notices from an organization, or legal updates on relevant cases, legislation, or FCC hearings. Another click could access a regular column on media, such as Norman Solomon's. A listserve could permit discussions among researchers and between researchers and users. And anyone with access to the Internet could find out who owns their local or national media and learn as much about them as we can assemble.

Dissemination

The dissemination plan, in order to serve both the needs of the research and specialist community and inspire broader public awareness about the institutional nature of the media, combines the best of traditional forms of communication with the latest in telecommunicative presentation and interaction.

World Wide Web

A data bank, initially text-based, will be constructed on a Web site. Researchers, teachers, community access participants, investors, regulators and anyone else with Internet access will have at their fingertips the entire encyclopedia of media ownership information. Links will also be established with numerous related sites, such as those maintained by the Library of Congress, Media Literacy, Harvard's Information Infrastructure Project, CEM, and others.

Educational and Curriculum Support Materials

Materials which will aid teachers in informing students of the structure of media systems will be produced in a number of formats and in conjunction with teachers at various grade levels to assure effective utility in the classroom. Those will include the following.

Large, color posters clearly illustrating ownership structures of major media will be distributed to high schools, colleges, and public libraries.

Handouts and overhead transparencies will be distributed to school teachers and would be available on an updated basis on the Web for easy downloading and reproduction.

A comic book describing the history and structure of the media and generating discussion of the role of the media in a democratic society would accompany the posters and be available for bulk order.

A video tape would be produced on the nature of media ownership and implications for media content, for social and educational impact, and for civic life. Funding would be sought to hold the price of the video to a level which would give it wide dissemination and use, and to update it, perhaps annually.

A CD-ROM would incorporate the data bank on ownership. A high-end graphical virtual landscape designed for interactive learning will be produced if funding and a marketing feasibility study warrant it.

Academic and Professional Dissemination

Conference - Dialogue on Ownership Issues

In the second year of the project, and contingent upon funding, MEF plans to coordinate a conference on -- *Who Owns the Media? and Why Does it Matter?*

The conference would include presentation of the project's research findings. But it would also initiate a high-level discussion among scholars, media professionals, owners, policymakers, and others with a keen interest in the structure of our media. Diversity of perspective would be key to a stimulating exchange on the issue and would be energetically sought. The conference may involve a collaboration with the Joan Shorenstein Barone Center on Press, Politics, and Public Policy at Harvard University or another academic site. C-Span coverage would be invited and prior publicity undertaken to alert viewers.

News Media

The project will seek to stimulate discussion in the popular news media on the issue of ownership. It would be a test in itself of the openness of our media system to see whether such information is widely disseminated through the mass media. Healthy skepticism on that score has prompted us to develop an extensive dissemination plan not entirely dependent on traditional media outlets. However, the project will make its experts and information available and will pursue every opportunity to respond to ownership issues in the media as they arise.

On a more proactive level, the project will issue an annual report targeted for media exposure on the **State of the Media**, which will offer a measure of the level of media ownership concentration. Models for this kind of media report are the Economic Policy Institute's annual "State of the American Worker" report issued annually with considerable success in becoming the lead Labor Day feature story in much of the media, and the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists'* doomsday clock which ranked the level of the threat of nuclear war and was widely referred to in the media during the 1970s and 1980s.

Evaluation

Each dissemination methodology will build into its operation a tailored means of evaluating its reach and effectiveness. In-process evaluation will allow the project to correct and improve materials and methods as the project progresses, and it will also offer a means of measuring the effects of a dissemination campaign that may have to rely on means beyond traditional media exposure. A planned annual report evaluating dissemination efforts may prove useful to those attempting to coordinate public education efforts on other issues which don't easily gain media attention. Quantitative measures, such

as media clips and Web site visits, will be combined with qualitative measures such as interviews and focus groups to evaluate different elements of the dissemination strategy. Researchers participating in the network will provide regular feedback on an informal basis and a formal annual review of their sense of involvement in and access to the project.

PERSONNEL

Principal Investigators:

Sut Jhally, founder and executive director of MEF, is professor of communication at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. He is author of *Codes of Advertising*, co-author of *Social Communication in Advertising* and *Enlightened Racism*; and co-editor, with Ian Angus of *Cultural Politics in Contemporary America*. He has written broadly on issues of popular culture and media and is regarded as one of the world's leading cultural studies scholars in the areas of advertising, media, and consumption. He is also well known for his 1990 video production, *Dreamworlds: Desire, Sex, and Power in Music Video* and more than a dozen other videos he has produced under the auspices of the Media Education Foundation.

Justin Lewis, president of MEF, is associate professor of communication, University of Massachusetts-Amherst. He is the author or editor of five books on television viewing, audiences, and cultural organization including *Art, Culture & Enterprise*, *The Ideological Octopus* and the forthcoming *Key Concepts in Television Studies*; and he has served internationally as a consultant on broadcast policy. He has lectured extensively on the political economy of the mass media.

Research Director

Brian Murphy, an adjunct professor in communication at Fitchburg State College and doctoral student at University of Massachusetts-Amherst, has extensive international experience in media research and analysis. He was most recently research coordinator for the Institute for Global Communications in San Francisco. He has served as principal researcher for the Rural Science and Technology Institute in Ottawa and the Development Media Trust in Zimbabwe; the Education, Documentation, and Information Centre for East and Southern Africa in Zimbabwe; the Canadian University Service Overseas; and numerous other development and research centers focusing on emerging media and the developing world. He is a co-founder and editor of the IGC's Peacenet Headline News. He was founder and CEO of the Africa Information Afrique (Southern Africa News

Agency), and currently serves as editorial consultant to the journal *Development Dialogue of Southern Africa*. He has had considerable journalism experience, including five years as foreign correspondent with the Inter Press News Agency, three years with the *Renewable Energy News*, and four years with the *African Business Magazine*. He has taught courses in media and journalism at the University of Massachusetts and the Carleton University School of Journalism in Ottawa. He is author of *The World Wired Up: Unscrambling the New Communications Puzzle* (1983); *Scotland in a Multinational World* (1980); *A Broadcasting Service for Distance Education* (1979); *Scottish Community Newspapers* (1978); *Scottish People at the Margin* (1977); *Galloway Tales* (1977); and numerous articles, book chapters, papers, and reviews. His most recent academic papers include studies of the international political economy of cyberspace, African media modeling, human rights journalism, and computer communications and global finance. Murphy was awarded a master's in journalism with distinction from Carleton University, received his bachelor's degree in history (honors) from Concordia University in Montreal, and has conducted post-graduate work in history at Edinburgh University in Scotland and Bishop's University in Quebec. His doctoral dissertation is on social movements and cyberspace.

MOP Advisory Board and Research Consultants:

This board is not a mere list of endorsers. Its members fully expect to be actively involved in advising on research priorities, methods, presentation and dissemination of research, and the connections between the project and larger social concerns about media and society.

Ben Bagdikian, dean, department of journalism, University of California at Berkeley; author, *The Media Monopoly*. (pending)

Chip Berlet, research director, Political Research Associates, Cambridge, MA; editor, *Eyes Right! Challenging the Right Wing Backlash*. (pending)

Nolan Bowie, associate professor in communications, Temple University; communications attorney. (pending)

Noam Chomsky, America's leading dissident intellectual and the most often quoted living author in the world. A professor of linguistics at MIT, he has written extensively on the media and the political culture, including the seminal work with Edward Herman, *Manufacturing Consent*.(pending)

Jeff Cohen, journalist, author, founder and executive director of Fairness And Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR). (pending)

Susan Douglas, professor of communication studies, University of Michigan;

national columnist on the media, and author of *Where the Girls Are* and *Inventing American Broadcasting*. (pending)

George Gerbner, dean emeritus Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania; principal investigator Cultural Indicators Project; founder and director of Cultural Environment Movement. (pending)

Don Hazen, IAJ need bio (pending)

Edward Herman (need bio).

Martin Linsky, lecturer in public policy, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University; author, *Impact: How the Press Affects Federal Policymaking*, and *Television and the Presidential Elections*.

Robert McChesney, professor of journalism at the University of Wisconsin-Madison; author of *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy: The Battle for Control of U.S. Broadcasting, 1928-1935*; *Corporate Media and the Threat to Democracy*; and, with Edward Herman, *The Global Media: The New Missionaries of Corporate Capitalism*. (pending)

Mark Crispin Miller, professor of communication, Johns Hopkins University. Has conducted extensive research and charting on media ownership. (need bio blurb)

Michael Morgan, chairman of the Department of Communication, University of Massachusetts-Amherst; a principal researcher with the Cultural Indicators Project, and co-author of many of its reports; has conducted extensive media effects research, both in the U.S. and internationally.

Herbert I. Schiller, need bio blurb (pending)

Janet Wasko, University of Oregon, who teaches and publishes widely on the political economy of the media. (pending)

Research Assistants

To be appointed primarily as student assistants earning course credit, although some at the graduate student level would receive some compensation.

Director of Dissemination

Thomas N. Gardner, Deputy Director, Development and Public Affairs MEF. He was formerly director of communications and public education, Union of Concerned Scientists; public affairs officer, Harvard Divinity School; senior editor, Harvard Institute for International Development; and senior political reporter and columnist, *The*

Montgomery Advertiser. He is a veteran freelance journalist, and was a leading publicist and activist in the civil rights and peace movements in the South. A University of Virginia graduate in sociology, he holds an MPA from the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, an MA in Journalism and Mass Communication from the University of Georgia, and is a doctoral student in communication at U.Mass.-Amherst.

Web Site Design Consultant

Leonard Rifas, Ph.D., is an instructor at Seattle Central Community College, and editor/publisher of *EduComics*. At the University of Washington, Dept. of Communications, his dissertation was on the "Dataforest" in which he designed the first virtual landscape on media ownership.

Web Site Designer/Manager

Nina B. Huntemann - Developed an international Web Site for The Network of East-West Women; moderated an on-line mail list for UN Conference on Women in Beijing and is a freelance Web Page designer, (clients include MEF- see site at www.igc.org/mef). She holds a BA from Penn State, an MA in Communication from the University of Massachusetts, and is currently a doctoral student in communication at U.Mass.-Amherst.

Budget

A detailed project budget can be found in *Appendix B*. The budget projected over a two-year period, less cost-sharing by MEF is \$276,224. That amount includes \$20,000 for a conference in the second year, which, if co-sponsored with the Barone Center, would entail a smaller contribution from the project. After the second year, the project should be sustainable at no more than an annual budget of \$100,000 in funds raised externally.

This budget is solely for the data base, research and dissemination operation of the Media Ownership Project under the auspices of the Media Education Foundation. Funding for specific and important research efforts underway at Johns Hopkins under Mark Miller, University of Wisconsin under Robert McChesney, Berkeley under Ben Bagdikian, and elsewhere should be funded directly through those host institutions or related research centers. In addition, organizations which focus primarily on regulatory concerns, legal monitoring and intervention, and legislative work related to media ownership issues should also be funded directly under their own auspices.

The Media Education Foundation is organized as a tax-exempt educational

organization under chapter 501 (c) 3 of the Internal Revenue Act and does not engage either in partisan electoral politics or lobbying for specific legislation. A fuller description of the Media Education Foundation follows in *Appendix A*.

