

**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE ROLE OF THE PRESS AND  
CORPERATE OWNERSHIP**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Three main hypotheses of the nature of press coverage currently dominate the debate of the press' relationship to the government among social scientists, journalists and activists. These three hypotheses consist of the lapdog camp, which argues that the press can be manipulated by government elites to control public opinion; the attack dog camp, which argues that the press acts in an overly negative manner and that it is always looking to expose the next big scandal; and the watchdog camp, which insists that the press acts in an educational and informative manner and that the press has an objective nonbiased watch on the government (Thrall). In this paper I will discuss why Corporate ownership of the press oftentimes causes the press become a lapdog to not only the government, but also to corporate America.

Whether or not the press is a watchdog is of great importance. A lapdog press is inadequately equipped to inform the public of the actions (and/or inactions) of major institutions, how those actions affect society. Therefore, most citizens remain unaware of many issues and the status quo is maintained (Thrall). Moreover, a press that aligns itself to major institutions' priorities is, presumably, a press that forces citizens to become complacent and accept injustices as a given.

## **OWNERSHIP**

Six major conglomerates (Viacom, Time Warner, Disney, News Corporation, General Electric and Bertelsmann) own the vast majority of the news media outlets in the United States (McChesney, 1997). All of the media conglomerates do business with investment bankers, meaning that they have financial assets outside of the news industry to protect (Chomsky and Herman, 1988). This puts the press in a conflict of interest situation; how does the press act as a watchdog if it has interests to maintain outside of keeping the public informed?

### **THE LAPDOG PRESS**

Much evidence exists for supporting the assertion that the press is a lapdog. Chomsky and Herman (1988) present several reasons why the press benefits from being a lapdog. First, the press consists of profit oriented organizations. Therefore, it is in the best interest of the press to produce news in a manner that is efficient and marketable. Because of this, the press routinely relies on the "beat" system to gather news. In other words, the press relies on press releases and public statements from elites as a steady stream of information to be used as a major source of the news. Though highly efficient, cost-effective and dependable, this method of gathering news presents information to reporters in such a way that it is already framed from corporate America's

perspective; therefore, the end result is news that lacks critical insight necessary for in-depth analyses to occur (Chomsky & Herman, 1988).

## **THE BEAT SYSTEM**

Because the media rely upon the beat system, and therefore only receive one side of the issue, news has a tendency to become dichotomized, often in ways that produce false dichotomies. In recent years the issue of terrorism has been a main focal point of the press. Concurrent with the Chomsky & Herman model, the press frequently presents the issue of terrorism as an issue in which, as George W. Bush said in an address to a joint session of congress nine days after the attacks on the World Trade Center, "You are either with us, or you are with the terrorists". The press made this assertion and the presence of phrases such as "axis of evil" prominent in the period following 9/11 (pers. obs.). Similar campaigns were employed during the McCarthy era to advance the anticommunist ideals of the U.S. government (Chomsky & Herman, 1988). Media coverage that stresses this type of thought presents a logical fallacy. When this happens news becomes propaganda (Chomsky & Herman, 1988). However news is inexpensive to produce in this manner because instead of presenting an issue as multifaceted and exploring the topic in detail, the media can present the issue in a point/counterpoint fashion that requires fewer resources (Chomsky & Herman, 1988).

## **LEAVING THE PUBLIC IN THE DARK**

Another product of corporate ownership of the media is the personalization and dramatization of news stories as an effort to attract an audience. In his book *News, The Politics of Illusion*, W. Lance Bennett describes a personalization bias in the news in which reporters focus on politics and human interest over policy. This gives the news emotive qualities that cloud issues and make it difficult for the average reader to understand the implications of policy. Bennett then goes on to describe a dramatization bias which further adds to the audience grabbing effect (Bennett, 2005). Although this may seem like a symptom of the attack dog model of the press it is my assertion that it is more a symptom of the lapdog press because it diverts attention from policy debates and focuses on the soap opera that exists within our elitist spheres, thus leaving the general public in the dark on many important aspects of the news. In a society in which many adults never reach the level of post-conventional moral reasoning (the level in which a person considers ethical matters above and beyond society's accepted norms)(Kohlberg, 1981), uncritical, one-sided or otherwise systemically biased news has the effect of having little educational value (Bennett, 2005).

## **PEER PRESSURE**

The press relies on money from advertisers as a major source of income (Chomsky & Herman, 1988). This acts as a “filter”, Chomsky and Herman argue, that prevents many issues, especially those that would challenge the actions of corporate America, from reaching the pages of the press. As a result, the public is kept in the dark on many important issues. It is very likely that this plays a role in determining the public’s priorities (Thrall).

News has great influence over public opinion and therefore influences the political landscape (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987). It is for this reason that news companies are cautious about what they present to the public. There are at least two well known instances of the sourcing filter, as Chomsky and Herman call it, that have been made public. The first is the situation that involves investigative reporters Steve Wilson and Jane Akre and Fox News. The second involves Lowell Bergman, a former editor for the show 60 Minutes, and CBS.

In the case involving fox, Monsanto, the manufacturer of NutraSweet, roundup and Ortho pesticides, along with other consumer products (Greenmatters.com, 2006) threatened to remove advertisements from all Fox affiliates if the Wilson/Akre story on the health risks of the use of Posilac (a growth hormone for cows produced by Monsanto) was aired. After Fox significantly distorted the story, Akre and Wilson quit and sued Fox for "intentionally airing false and distorted news reports". They lost their case

because the court found that distorting news is not a crime (Rampton and Stauber, 1998).

The CBS case involved the former vice president of research and development for Brown and Williamson Tobacco, Jeffery Wigand. Wigand lost his job with Brown and Williamson tobacco after he repeatedly took issue with the management over the company's reluctance to produce low tar cigarettes, along with issues that he had with additives Brown and Williamson used in their tobacco blends. Wigand decided to aid CBS producer Lowell Bergman with a *60 Minutes* report on fire safe cigarettes. Wigand sat for an interview with Mike Wallace. The interview never aired because CBS was fearful of legal retaliation by Brown and Williamson. Because of Wigand's communication to CBS, Brown and Williamson stopped Wigand's severance package and began harassing him. Lowell Bergman quit CBS because of the ordeal (Hirschfelder, 1999).

Another example of this type of behavior is much less publicized than the two above stated cases. It involves the Coca Cola Company. Coca Cola is accused of contracting paramilitaries as early as 1989 to carry out the kidnapping and torturing of hundreds of Coca Cola employees for participating in union related activities. Furthermore, Coca Cola is accused of being responsible for the murders of eight union leaders and organizers (killercoke.org, 2006). This issue has received relatively little news coverage within the mainstream television

media. Much of the coverage that it has received has been in small town and student newspapers and the allegations have simply euphemized to terms such as “labor disputes” or “human rights issues” (pers. obs.). I personally cannot see any legitimate reasons that the Coca Cola story would be avoided by mainstream TV media other than fear of losing advertising dollars from the world’s largest soft drink distributor.

## **FAKE NEWS**

Video news releases, VNR’s, are video clips that are provided to television stations mostly by PR firms for corporations and government agencies. Although they are difficult to study because the media keeps the issue under wraps, the Center for Media and Democracy found that 95% of VNR’s that they were able to track came from corporations. VNR’s are free to stations, and therefore save a bundle in station operating costs. VNR’s generally go on air unedited or edited only for length. What’s more is that VNR’s almost never are disclosed by stations as being from an outside source ([Farsetta](#) and Price, 2006). Given the observations of Iyengar and Kinder that television dramatically effects the opinions of the American public (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987) this type of propaganda undoubtedly sets the agenda in favor of corporate America.

## **CONCLUSION**



The lapdog camp presents us with an assertion that the press serves the interests of elites. With large corporations dominating the ownership of the media this assertion is likely true. This is unfortunate; our nation depends on the press to provide us with fair, balanced and unbiased news. There is an expectation that the press is acting as the watchdog for the masses. The absence of these qualities leaves us in a position where our society is easily manipulated for the benefit of the government. Credible information is a valuable asset. It allows us, as a country, to make informed decisions about our leaders and it influences our opinions, and therefore, how we are led. However, the existing body of research that supports the sad contention that we cannot trust our own press to provide us with this important asset.

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