I cancelled my cable TV subscription recently. I did it to reduce personal expenditures, since I am currently attending school fulltime. Another crucial motivator, however, was of qualitative nature. My TV consumption had reduced to news programs, some sports, the weather report, and an occasional movie. I am not star-struck, so I have no interest in celebrity celebrations. Moreover, since my own reality keeps me quite amused, unreality shows do not. I literally *avoided* content and concluded that this consumption pattern does not warrant an expensive subscription. Admittedly, I kept the equipment and occasionally watch traditional broadcasters, but their mediocre programming also only arouses meager interest.

Human skill led to great technological advancements and shaped the media's evolution. Plato, Gutenberg, Bell, Edison, Zuse, Eco, Cerf, Berners-Lee, Gates, and countless others helped defining content, production, and diffusion. Few of those listed concerned themselves with qualitative aspects. Contemporary media firms, on the other hand, spend most of their energy on exploiting technology for profit through quantity. Quality seems irrelevant. How can we otherwise comprehend over-saturation and superficiality?

My proposition is that the consumer bears a much greater share of responsibility for the media's current characteristics than most of us realize or dare to acknowledge. Yes, producers bombard us with easily digestible sensations of zero nutritional value for the intellect. We cannot ignore, however, that not only demand, but also the mere *acceptance* of what is supplied leads to thriving markets. Consumers who are indifferent about the media content offered inspire its producers to maximize output (and thus income) while minimizing input. As a by-product, quality suffers. This paper shows that consumer choice can realign content-determinants and promote better quality. A horizontal approach has promise, since vertical regulation is insufficient for the task.

Growth

The rise of media conglomerates is a cause and effect in the overall globalization puzzle (Levine 73). Transportation, telecommunication, and digitalization provided both ability and opportunity for media firms to conquer our everyday life. Conglomeration means that "fewer and fewer hands" (Croteau and Hoynes 34) control industrial segments that own, produce, and disseminate media content. Not variety, but efficiency, repetition, and uniformity rule. In most cases, shareholder-value emphasis outweighs creative aspiration. To maximize profit and survive in the highly competitive worldwide economy, firms dominate markets through aggressive expansion and vigorously exploit consolidation-enabled synergies. Increased authority of business managers in media firms helped securing the stakes (Croteau and Hoynes 47). Consolidation thus results predominantly in financial and productivity gains for producers. Sometimes this efficiency occurs at the expense of integrity and excellence.

Elana Levine explores consolidation effects at Disney in a recently published paper. For one thing, Disney achieved the customary economics benefits. As conglomerates do, Disney sustains market dominance due to its size and reach. As a result, diffusion scales better and productive efficiency benefits from synergies. Repackaging and cross-platform distribution enhance revenues with minimal input. Segment specialization permits catering to a variety of discrete audiences (74). In combination, size and specialization ensure market power, secure revenues, enable cost advantages, and facilitate cross advertising. Specialization, Levine explains, also creates opportunity to disseminate ideology. In Disney's case, a wedding show staged at Disney World "asserts … normative sexuality and … gender and racial roles" (78), "[narrates] … heterosexual family life" (81), and "promote[s] consumption (79). Emphasis on traditional cultural values "[instills] Disney-appropriate images of romance and marriage …, images that Disney needs to sustain its reputation as reliable provider of family entertainment and reliable supporter of family values" (80). However, images can also create tension. Disney produced one equivocal episode comprising a "[mix] of heterosexual male potency [and] premarital celibacy [myths]" (80) in an exotic foreign location, separating spotless Disney World from the episodes' guiding sexual theme. Tension also emerged when Disney's spotlessness collided with homosexuality issues in their programming and related to its corporate policies (77). Thus, at Disney, consolidation not only secured profit gains. Catering to varied "mass and niche markets" (85) caused the firm to assume ambiguous positions toward socio-cultural matters. In the long term, such maneuvering corrodes credibility.

Adaptation

Neil Postman illustrated how TV emphasizes amusement instead of discourse and information. He believed that the presentation of news as entertainment promotes triviality and fragmentation (102-3), and concluded that "[TV news feature] a type of discourse that abandons logic, reason, sequence, and rules of contradiction" (105). Levine, analogously, writes of "blurred boundaries between reality and fantasy, fact and fiction, truth and falsity" and the potential of "cultural confusion" (85) due to Disney's ambiguity. Tendentious incoherence and de-contextualization deplete media content of meaningfulness, resulting in fluff. Yet besides qualitative erosion, we should be concerned about *repurposing* of the media. Chomsky points to a significant economics factor in the media business: motivated by income potential from advertising, producers sell "audiences" to promoters (Mitchell and Schoeffel 14, see also Croteau and Hoynes 58-9). Content is thus of secondary importance, since consumer demographics and their purchasing power are more valuable than intrinsic quality. Although repurposing is not a novel practice (Edison bribed writers in 1881 for sympathetic commentary about electricity, Bazerman 203-8), the ubiquity and sophistication of contemporary media re-appropriation enabled through technology and experience is (Briggs and Burke, 247-8).

Political governance did not shape the media landscape so that it considers varied interests. Constituencies and corporate donors influence politics through votes and contributions. Politicians strive to please both groups. However, since corporations control media coverage, we cannot expect politicians to curtail the system that funds their campaign and carries their message. The media, on the other hand, enjoys friendly regulation if it aids officials before, during, and after their campaign. The support comes in form of financial assistance, ideological agreement, or preferential reporting (Croteau and Hoynes 85-6, 89+, 113). It is a double dilemma. Media-powerhouses and politicians hold a firm grip on their stakes due to complementing objectives. The consumer, it appears, is powerless. In a perfect world (which I know we do not live in), ordinary citizens would elect a government that implements media policies beneficial for society as a whole. Moreover, media actors would "[make] known the conduct of the individuals who have chosen to wield the powers of government" (James Mill cited in Jarlov). Regulation would resemble the people's will, promote content that meets consumer demand, encourage the media's monitoring of the elite in power, and ensure evaluation of regulatory activities. Contemporary business-friendly policies do not meet these virtues, and regulation in the U.S. is destined to remain inadequate for the near future due to "close ties between FCC regulators, and the media they regulate" (Cray 13). This meshing of business and political interests constitutes another form of media repurposing we should be concerned about.

The European Union's (EU) regulatory body promotes business interests too, but faces seemingly more difficult challenges. Unity is only relative as long as domestic interests motivate policy. Still, EU members agreed, among other things, to preserve cultural identity by "[reserving] … transmission time for European works" (Wheeler 356). The measure did not intend to discourage American firms from doing business in the EU, since a different directive viewed U.S. companies based in an EU country as *European* (356). To further competition, "hostility" by the regulators toward public broadcasters aimed at undermining their competitive advantage (353-4). Additionally, merger- and alliance-friendly policies (365) resulted from the conclusion that "fragmentation … stymied … growth" (366).

One might wonder whether there exist positive consequences from the media industry's consolidation. In theory, a multinational media firm could feed its outlets with content variety from all over the world. However, this would be costly. Herman and Chomsky explain news sourcing and observe that settling on easily accessible and presumably credible sources (domestic businesses and government organizations) "reduces investigative expense[s]" (19). Thus, most media could, but do not favor variety and quality to efficiency, despite their reach and resources. Also, do managerial cost-cutting skills and the maximizing of efficiency have any positive effect *in my wallet*? Economics theory suggests that reduced input costs result in lower prices. However, prevailing shareholder orientation of business managers easily offsets this law. Rising profits benefit owners of the firm, not the consumer. We can draw an analogy from technology and manufacturing outsourcing. A consultancy found that offshoring generates $1.14 in return for every dollar of a U.S. firm's expenditures sent to India. It "[keeps] companies profitable" (Baily and Farrell). Notice that they did not write *it allows companies to lower prices*.

Media governance in Europe and in the U.S. (see Croteau and Hoynes 87-8) had reasonable purpose up to the middle of the last century. In the 1960s, for example, the FCC chose to balance the market out of concern that emerging cable "put 'free' network television out of business" (Briggs and Burke 297). However, antiquated regulation approaches are unfit for the twenty-first century media scenery. Politicians are opportunistic. Corporate managers are economically motivated. So are advertisers. However, all three kinds merely ride a bandwagon hauled by the consumer. You and I, the consumer, greatly underestimate the consequences of our *accepting* of media content. As long as we consume it without examining merit and quality, content suppliers will go on to provide what we allegedly demand, but merely swallow. A good case in point illustrating content-indifference and associations between politics and the media is Fox News' depiction of an alleged link between Al-Qaeda and Iraq's former dictator. A U.S. House of Representatives report lists "61 misleading statements about the strength of the Iraq-al Qaeda alliance" made by members of the Bush administration in the weeks leading up to the Iraq war (U.S. House of Representatives 22). A study conducted after the beginning of the war found that nearly seventy percent of Fox News viewers believed that the U.S. found "clear evidence" for such a link, which represented a higher ratio than the one found with viewers of other stations (Kull, Ramsay, and Lewis 583). Yet the 9/11 commission eventually determined that there was no such link (Cooper). Of course, ideologically motivated deception entails potential for far more extensive and acute consequences, in comparison to an entertainment consumption-scenario. Media consumers should therefore evaluate all sources and content critically. This is one factor in my proposed horizontal approach.

Conclusion

FCC commissioner Copps believes that technology's relative intricacy –previously exploited by media insiders– is legacy and that a better understanding of the finer points now facilitates debate about regulation (cited by Cray 15). However, continued discourse merely constitutes attempting to heal a broken led with a band-aid and thus unlikely addresses governance issues sufficiently. Postman thought that school education is "all we have" to achieve "media consciousness" (161), but neglected the parents' role in teaching young adults how to make sense of things and how to make choices. The remedy I propose involves consciousness and promotes choice. It grounds on the idea that we consume media because we can, not because we need to. Only selective content discrimination by consumers will curtail the media industry and politicians. Diligently rejecting quality-free quantity translates into insisting on relevance. The media then will reinstate the *depth and variety* it lost through fragmentation and concentration, and politicians will rediscover their constituency's interests. There is precedence that grass roots efforts work. Shell, for example, balked in 1995 when its plan to sink an oil platform at sea was met with a boycott of its gas stations. (Rohwedder and Gumbel). People acted on their conscience and reminded the energy giant of a basic economic law: households supply revenues. And in 2003 a diverse assembly of interest groups won a court decision to halt FCC regulation. Their motivation: "fear … that further consolidation will produce media in which only the powerful few will be heard at all" (Beckerman). In both cases, the vertical regulatory body failed society spectacularly after business and citizen interests collided.

The choice what media to boycott should be up to the individual. Yet it will be necessary to provide guidance how to evaluate content. In that respect, Postman is correct: we need educators. How to fund such an effort could easily become another point of contention, given that politicians govern education policies and funding. The rejection of media content could also affect labor- and stock markets negatively, when consumer choice affects economics factors. However, perhaps the simple threat to discriminate against the media will cause corporations to adjust business practices quickly, and so mitigate adverse economic effects. Greater depth and media diversity without a doubt will also produce undesirable content. Not all output will be decent and non-violent, which is a concern for parents and educators. This consequence might be difficult to accept for parents in particular. However, in actuality it reminds us only of their main responsibility. Namely, that it is essential to teach offspring appropriately about cognition and judgment.

Postman thought also that Huxley was right. The critique is quite unflattering, for they argued that we prefer entertainment to meaning, without comprehending why we abandoned taking substance into account (Postman 163). We also heard early warning by Plato, cautioning us of irrelevance and superficiality. Yet it seems unlikely that policy resulting from debate will change corporate and political maneuvering, and result in an emphasis of quality. Although large media firms have social responsibility for content as they control most sources and channels, their appetite for profits takes precedence over journalistic and qualitative aspirations. And the probability that politicians will jeopardize contributions from media firms through far-reaching regulation is low, too. Should we therefore abolish the FCC? End its "laissez-faire approach" (Croteau and Hoynes 99) toward businesses and regulation? Probably not. It will become obsolete when the consumer takes the media back.

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