

# Transformations

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### **Democracy Now! Decolonising US News Media**

By Kevin Howley

*It is a serious threat to this country not to have a media that is a check and balance on those in power. What we see now is that the media in this country has reached an all-time low having a media embedded in the power structure – Amy Goodman*

#### **Introduction**

This essay starts from the premise that corporate interests have colonised the US press – its dominant institutions as well as its professional assumptions, practices and routines. The colonisation of US news media is especially problematic for working journalists. That is, while economic imperatives and commercial interests have long constrained journalistic autonomy, the corporate consolidation of the news industry – with the attendant demands for cost cutting on one hand and profit maximisation on the other – has all but extinguished any semblance of a free press. In the era of corporate colonisation, the US press corps finds it increasingly difficult to maintain its independence from direct and indirect corporate control.

Of course, the field of journalism is not unique in this regard; corporate interests permeate most every facet of daily living – from family and community life, to education, leisure activities and cultural production (see Deetz, Giroux, Ikerd, Maxwell). Nevertheless, corporate colonisation of the press is especially troublesome inasmuch as this condition has enormous implications for the prospects of democratic self-governance. With this in mind, I begin with an overview of a growing body of academic and practitioner analyses that illustrate the extent to which the US news media serves corporate interests thereby degrading independent journalism and fundamentally undermining democratic values and practices.

The essay proceeds with an analysis of the journalistic philosophy and routines employed by *Democracy Now!* – Pacifica radio's daily news and public affairs program. It is my contention that *Democracy Now!* is at the vanguard of an emerging independent media sector that is revitalising US news media at a decisive moment in American (journalism) history. Further, I maintain that it is *Democracy Now!*'s attentiveness to counter-hegemonic struggles that contribute to its success as the nation's largest public media collaboration. Throughout, I suggest that *Democracy Now!*'s significance is best understood in terms of its relation to both corporate news organisations and grassroots media.

#### **Corporate Colonisation of the Press**

For a quarter century, former journalist Ben Bagdikian has charted the scale and scope of corporate control of the US media system. Bagdikian's analysis reveals the detrimental effects corporate consolidation has had on the American media landscape: the erection of nearly insurmountable barriers of entry into media markets; the precipitous decline of minority owned

media outlets; the homogenisation of media form and content; and the economic censorship of public expression (Bagdikian).

One of the most pronounced effects of media consolidation has been on local news and cultural production. In recent years, communities across the United States have seen locally owned and operated media outlets swallowed up by outside interests eager to maximise profits, minimise investment, and reduce overheads. Regulatory changes – most notably the Clinton-era Telecommunications Reform Act of 1996 – combined with synergies realised through new media technologies, have facilitated this latest round of media consolidation. As sociologist Eric Klinenberg notes, while market efficiencies benefit corporate media giants, local communities have lost a great deal:

The local reporters, veteran TV producers and live DJs who once provided the stories, sights and sounds that made our hometowns feel like home have become endangered species in the age of Big Media, replaced by the same wire copy, digitally voice-tracked radio programs, video news releases and other canned content that runs in every market, coast to coast. (Klinenberg 22)

When we consider the media system in relation to the broader political economy, the significance of the communication industries to corporate ascendancy comes into sharp relief. As communication scholar Stanley Deetz observes, “the institutional relations between mass-media institutions and other corporate institutions contribute to the preeminence of the corporation as a social institution” (Deetz 31). It is the structural alignments within and between various sectors of the economy that have precipitated the crisis of US journalism and which pose the greatest threat to independent journalism and a free press.

The institutional relationship between the media industries and other corporate enterprises is most fully realised through the practice of advertising. Pleasing corporate sponsors is of the utmost concern for the media industries because commercial advertising “pays the bills.” Corporate media, therefore, have little incentive to challenge the values, interests or practices associated with corporate institutions. While this logic makes perfect business sense, applying this same rationale to the practice of journalism is a recipe for disaster.

None of this is not to suggest that corporate elites exercise direct editorial control over working journalists. As media scholar Robert McChesney notes, the effects of corporate media ownership on journalism are far more subtle, but no less profound: “The corporate/commercial pressure on news often takes place indirectly, and is therefore less likely to be recognised as such by journalists or the public” (“Problem of Journalism” 311). Yet, these pressures are manifest in the day-to-day practice of US journalism.

Indeed, in the era of corporate colonisation, news organisations are expected to do more with less. Compelled to generate profits while minimising redundancies, newsrooms across the country are cutting corners with one hand and enhancing the entertainment value of their news product with the other. Typically, this strategy involves eliminating jobs for working journalists, curtailing if not completely eliminating investigative reporting, re-purposing entertainment fare as news content, and having a growing reliance on the public relations industry for “pre-packaged” news items.

In this environment, journalists are left with few good options. Anxious to avoid antagonising commercial interests or government news sources, journalists rarely challenge people in positions of power and authority for fear of losing access to “official sources.” Instead, working journalists play it safe by taking a less confrontational stance toward elites, pursuing instead the sensational, the titillating or the trivial news item. Thus, journalists create the illusion of conflict and controversy by covering relatively inconsequential “news items” like celebrity gossip, or the sexual misconduct of politicians, while studiously avoiding substantive public policy issues.

















