

Nicole Fortman, Grant Jones, Jack (Jonathan) McFarland, Haley Pfeiffer

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Professor Zha

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Media Conglomeration: Argumentative Essay

Powerful corporations known as media conglomerates have an enormous impact on mainstream media. These major corporations typically own several entities that make up various media stations and outlets. Most of the time, media companies survive off of paid advertisement fees which ultimately leads to corporate interest. Corporate/ownership interest severely affects what is and isn't covered within the media. Often times, stories end up biased or omitted in order to prevent offending advertisers and owners (Shah). Aside from media conglomerates, the government also plays a large role in the misunderstanding of media and its true potential for success. Differing viewpoints as to how media is portrayed is to blame for this issue. At first glance, one might question why large companies running media is a bad idea. That just feels like a successful business, right? When it comes to media however, it is important to consider the important role that a free and diverse media takes on in politics, culture, and economics within the United States (Shah). We lose the sense of diversity and free dialogue when a few companies take over and control nearly all of our mass media. The result of reduced diversity affects the way issues and perspectives are seen as well as undue political, cultural, and economic influence. Media conglomerates pose an enormously large threat to politics, culture, and our economy.

In addition to media conglomerates, the government also has some control over the media. Radio and TV broadcasters are required to obtain licenses through the government due to

the law stating that the public owns airwaves. As a result, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) issues licenses and regulates airwaves (Government Regulation of the Media). The government has a perception that media is a commodity. The FCC has the right to regulate media by acting as a police agency. They have fined several media outlets in the past for violating public decency standards (Government Regulation of the Media). The government passed the Telecommunications Act in 1996 which allowed for media companies to own more media outlets. The passing of this act had a major influence on media conglomerates. Since the late 1970s, the government has viewed the media as a provider of a product rather than an enabler to society. In an article titled, *Media Conglomeration is Detrimental to Democracy*, author Rachel Card states, “As of now, 90% of all American media outlets are owned by either National Amusements, Disney, Time Warner, Comcast, News Corps or Sony” (Card). These six corporations each hold their own agendas that make up for much of what we watch every day given all of the entities within them. Both conglomerates and the government also prioritize profit instead of viewing media as a journalistic integrity that is an enabler for dialogue and debate. The issue with these six major corporations is that they base their agendas off of what citizens and the government indicate to be relevant. They are too focused on themselves and trying to maintain a positive reputation that they almost never consider the ethical part of things (card). Media Conglomerates weaponize large corporations and the government by giving them the ability to use their power the way they want too – by maximizing profit and continuing to allow large corporations to take over. Ultimately, this takes away from the way media should be viewed; as an enabler for political, cultural, and economic debate.

The opposing side of the negative outlook on media conglomerates and the government is those who support their efforts and find them beneficial in one way or another. Another term for

large corporations focused on media ownership with only a few companies or individuals is known as media consolidation. A subbranch of the government also known as the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) continually pushes for more consolidation. According to an article titled, *The Pros and Cons of Media Consolidation that are Worth Knowing*, the author states, “In its latest proposal, the FCC proposes to allow a large corporation in the top 20 media markets to own a major newspaper, two television stations, up to eight radio stations and provide Internet service” (*The Pros and Cons of Media Consolidation that are Worth Knowing*). Potential benefits of this include increased profit, and providing the consumers with exactly what they want. Some say that this gives the people more control. The more we allow large corporations to own multiple media outlets, the less involved the government is going to be. Pro consolidation critics also believe that there is an advantage of converging technologies. Converging technologies could make it so that it’s possible to receive one bill a month that has your TV, internet and phone bill combined (*The Pros and Cons of Media Consolidation that are Worth Knowing*). This could also call for a discounted bill for consumers. Diversification is the final pro for those who are pro media consolidation. The diversification argument claims that with consolidation, there is less investment risk. The idea behind this is that a bad phase by the subsidiary of the media conglomerate can be balanced by more profitable ventures (*The Pros and Cons of Media Consolidation that are Worth Knowing*).

The government should reconsider their viewpoints surrounding mass media. The continued promotion of media conglomerates is detrimental to politics, culture, and our economy in general. The public deserves the freedom and right to choose which companies to support. They should not have to put thought into all of the companies they are supporting, should they be supporting a large media outlet (Card). For example, if someone wants to watch Disney channel,

they should not have to think twice about the fact that they are also supporting ABC since Disney owns them. It isn't fair that the public is unaware of where their money is going and how it is being spent. This isn't just about "the business" and making profit. Doing the ethically right thing takes priority in this situation and the government has a duty to abide by that. One can rest assured that if the public was taking money from the government illegally, they would find out and press serious federal charges. It is not right to support and promote something that goes against their own ethical morals and beliefs. Biased political views and less local news are two more negative effects are caused by media conglomerates and the government's support. In order to have a more diverse mass media environment, we must start promoting more freedom and honesty. The public needs to stay informed and have the right to inform and influence others. Media conglomerates largely takes away from the public's autonomy. It limits the information we do know as all of these companies become one and begin supporting the same concepts. It is crucial to have an environment where there is competition and differing views. The next several sections will take a deeper dive into specific examples of how media conglomerates pose an enormous threat to politics, culture, and economics.

The power of giant media companies in America has become a threat to American culture. The rise in reliance and belief in what is seen and heard through large media companies has brought about some not so welcome changes to American culture. There have been academic studies that hint at social media being quite destructive to the trust that the people have in the government, news media, institutions, and people in general. A great passage from the article "Why the Past 10 Years of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid" by Jonathan Haidt, which was posted in *The Atlantic*, describes the shift saying,

“Part of America’s greatness in the 20th century came from having developed the most capable, vibrant, and productive network of knowledge-producing institutions in all of human history, linking together the world’s best universities, private companies that turned scientific advances into life-changing consumer products, and government agencies that supported scientific research and led the collaboration that put people on the moon...The new omnipresence of enhanced-virality social media meant that a single word uttered by a professor, leader, or journalist, even if spoken with positive intent, could lead to a social-media firestorm, triggering an immediate dismissal or a drawn-out investigation by the institution. Participants in our key institutions began self-censoring to an unhealthy degree, holding back critiques of policies and ideas—even those presented in class by their students—that they believed to be ill-supported or wrong.”

Giant media has fed into and helped along the process of shutting down or ignoring information which they think to be incorrect or do not believe in. It is difficult to stray from the masses. Many outlets often end up telling viewers and listeners what they would like to hear to keep their numbers up and visitors happy. When viewers and listeners like what they hear, they are likely to return, feeding into the cycle.

Giant media conglomerates have taken over much of the media and news that is available to the public. Because of this, the information being relayed is not always the most reliable and can come across being one sided. The book titled *It's Show Time! Media, Politics, and Popular Culture* by David A. Schultz discusses news and how it is conveyed through media. Much of what is seen is produced based on the conditions of that time. According to Schultz, “News is not defined under circumstances chosen by the news industry itself, but under specific social, economic, and political conditions. It is these forces of production that to a large extent shape

what will air on television or radio or will appear in newspapers. The economic or social forces of production that determine the structure of the ownership of the news gathering industry, or the political values that define the relationship between the media and the government, create a specific set of patterns of behavior that define news” (p. 14). What is considered news is dependent on the other social institutions of society. The major institutions in the United States include political, social, and economic. Schultz later goes on to describe the factors of the social institutions and the roles they play describing,

“In the United States, four major social institutions or imperatives are especially important in defining and structuring the news production establishment. The first is the democratic imperative, and it refers to the special relationship between the press or news gathering industry and the government. It also describes the role that the press and other media are supposed to play in our democracy. A second institution refers to the corporate structure of news ownership and production in the United States. The news industry is not owned by the government, it is privately owned and increasingly with a corporate for-profit structure. The third imperative is the increasing entertainment focus on the news, dictated, in part, by its need to compete for audiences against other forms of entertainment. Finally, the political nature of news refers to the participatory role of the news industry in the political process. Here, the news industry itself competes against citizens and other organizations to lobby and influence the political process to obtain specific political outcomes.” (p. 14).

The struggle to produce content and news that is unbiased, reliable, and shows the full picture is increasingly prevalent. Giant media find their niche and target audience and stick to producing the content that gained their attention in the first place. The less media outlets that are available to get information from, the more difficult it is to get multiple views on a situation. As

smaller media outlets are bought up by giant media, there are less stories being told. Rather, a large conglomerate handing out the same stories to be retold by their offshoots. Diminished viewpoints and information create a very small scope for American culture. This likely is a stunt to the growth of American culture and society.

Previously, there have been limits established to how many newspapers, radio, and television stations a company could own. This establishment was a helpful way to keep growing giant media companies in check. As these companies grew and bought out other media sources, it was potentially limiting to the public. With technology now being a factory, giant media companies have grown exponentially and can be found on any corner of the internet and technology.

In order to have a well-rounded and knowledgeable society, it is important to be exposed to many different opinions, voices, and views on a situation. The public must be able to turn to a variety of sources when looking for information. This is the best way to ensure that society does not become stone-walled. As written in the *New York Times* article titled "Fewer Media Owners, More Media Choices", author Jim Rutenberg discusses both outlooks on giant media in America. One side of the argument states, "The response of the public interest advocates -- and some politicians -- is that while the media menu has expanded, it is chosen according to the commercial interests of a handful of companies." (Rutenberg). This quote reiterates the impact that commercial interests have on the information that is likely to be shared by giant media companies. A company is much more likely to produce and distribute information that is likely to help increase their financial situation. If a giant corporation has some major sponsors that want a certain message or agenda pushed, the media outlet will likely push that agenda. Yes, most media outlets, large or small, may be subject to this. However, if there are only four or five

giant media corporations, those agendas are going to be pushed unopposed at much larger scales. “The ownership structure of the media dictates that the production of news must be for a profit and, thus, what appears as news is shaped by the needs of making money...the increasingly corporate structure of the media means that news is not simply an objective presentation of political events where the needs of democracy dictate what will be aired or printed” (Schultz 17,19). Giant media has a tight grasp on news and information that is released to the public. Often enough, the American public only hears what giant media companies want them to hear. American culture becomes limited in its knowledge, showing bias based on what information is fed to them.

As with any giant corporation, there is the risk of having too much power. In terms of giant media, the power in question would be knowledge and information. When certain information is withheld, it endangers the freedoms of speech and press. The American public has the right to knowledge of what is going on around. The consolidation of media and giant media corporations become a threat to American culture when the possibility of restricting the flow of knowledge arises. American culture cannot grow and thrive when it does not have adequate literature to learn from.

The idea of a few media companies forming a concentration of ownership over the media in the world has posed a threat to democracy, specifically in the realm of politics. There are many concerns to be had about this and plenty of evidence as to why one should be concerned. While many of these companies as well as social media companies have provided easy access to be informed, it ultimately has only resulted in concerns for the general public.

The media cannot be very independent when it is only owned and supported by a few companies or classes. Oussema Othmeni states in his article, *The Media Game in the US: A Threat to Democracy?*

“The Media cannot act independently from exterior motives and pressure when it is directed by a State-Corporate nexus that serves the interests of the political elite. The ‘State-Corporate nexus’ is a term that is used to describe the interlinked interests and agendas of private corporations and the political class. Operating under a similar framework automatically shifts the Media’s role from a watchdog – that keeps a critical eye on the government – to a lapdog that serves to please. Hence, informing becomes a matter of preference, and the diversity of opinions is reduced” (Othmeni).

Diversity of thinking and independence is threatened when a few corporations and companies are in control of the majority of the media. Othmeni goes on to say, “It is true that independent Media exists in the US, but the major outlets are controlled by six conglomerates. These six companies are: Comcast, Disney, Time Warner, News Corp, National Amusement, and Sony” (Othmeni). Only six companies are in control of the vast majority of media. Only a few companies in control will ultimately provide very few diverse opinions and ideas being shared and reported.

A second democratic issue that has arisen is the idea of personal privacy. Many of these big tech companies have access to a lot of our personal information. The concern of online protection and online personal information access is more important than ever. With concerns of malware, phishing, hackers, and more, people are needing to be more and more careful with their personal information online. Clara Hendrickson and William Galston explain the issue of privacy

with these powerful tech companies in their article, *Big Tech Threats: Making Sense of the Backlash Against Online Platforms*.

“A similar divide between the actions taken in Europe and the U.S. on online privacy issues has taken shape. Europe has responded forcefully to protect users’ online privacy, bolstering its already robust set of privacy laws when it passed the General Data Protection Regulation in the spring of 2016. The law is widely recognized as the toughest and most comprehensive digital privacy law on the books and is grounded in a cultural attachment to protecting the right of individuals to control access to their personal information. Across the Atlantic, the U.S. embraces a different concept and culture of privacy. The American privacy regime largely focuses on protecting individuals from state intrusion and companies from red tape. At a time when individual companies hold an unprecedented amount of personal information on their users, the U.S. currently lacks a comprehensive federal privacy law governing the collection and use of personal data by technology companies” (Hendrickson, Galston).

While the United States is opting for a more privatized approach and trying to allow for more democracy within this area, they have a wide threat to privacy, meaning that, eventually, more laws may need to be put into place for protection against these threats to user’s private information. Otherwise, it will become easier for the wrong hands to get a hold of private information from these few major tech companies.

Another issue is that the companies in control are themselves very flawed. Because of this, the media is subject to the flaws and agendas of the companies, and because of this, democracy suffers. In the article, *The New Nightmare Scenario for the Media*, Siva Vaidyanathan talks about the effect of the noise of the media.

“That’s just one way this three-dimensional model of media ownership and power costs

Americans dearly. The more significant harm is in the cacophony it has generated. This system has filled our lives with alerts, seductions, addictions, and obsessions. It has not helped us find enlightenment, education, or edification. We were supposed to be smarter, more tolerant, and more fun because of the digital revolution. Instead, we are angry, tired, confused, and divided. This is not a good condition for a democratic republic that depends on the media to inform and organize citizens to govern themselves. The current American media system is a lot more complicated than critics warned or champions promised in the early years of this century. “Breaking up” big companies through antitrust might help the situation a bit. But many of these companies do a fine job breaking themselves up as they stumble and fail” (Vaidhyathan).

The constant inflow of negatives from the companies in control pushes an idea of division through social media and other media and news outlets. As the companies in control fall apart and push potentially harmful agendas, the end users of these mediums and media outlets suffer and the state of the populace becomes negative and harmful also. This is a continuous problem for democracy as a result of only a few companies having control over the vast majority of media.

Some might say that social media being owned by a few corporations has created more positive than negative results. For example, because of these corporations, the media is not government owned and is privatized in many ways, eliminating government agenda. It also has allowed for innovations and the existence of social media. Social media now allows for quick information processing for users. Now, users can quickly interact with the information they receive from, ultimately, these giant tech companies. However, the truth is this is in fact doing more harm than good to democracy. A collection of reporters from pewresearch.org explain that

this fact has allowed for much manipulation and division of societies. “Even in countries where assessments of social media’s impact are largely positive, most believe it has had some pernicious effects – in particular, it has led to manipulation and division within societies. A median of 84% across the 19 countries surveyed believe access to the internet and social media have made people easier to manipulate with false information and rumors” (Wike, Silver, et al). This goes on to say how the media has created a sense of empowerment, but ultimately has resulted in disruption and division. “In addition to being the most negative about social media’s influence on democracy, Americans are consistently among the most negative in their assessments of specific ways social media has affected politics and society. For example, 79% in the U.S. believe access to the internet and social media has made people more divided in their political opinions, the highest percentage among the 19 countries polled” (Wike, Silver, et al). The proof is in even the opinions of the public. While having somewhat of a positive feel, the impact on democracy has been ultimately negative and divisive.

After reviewing how a few media companies forming a concentration of ownership over the media in the world has posed a threat to democracy, some would also argue that giant media conglomerates also pose a threat to our economy in the United States. The economic structure of the United States has gone through a lot of changes since the start of the pandemic. A decent handful of these changes were also in direct result of the American people turning to media and large media companies as a source of entertainment. As we have learned throughout a majority of our research, a large media conglomerate is a media company that owns several different media outlets. Examples of these outlets can be music, television, radio, print publications, etc. These companies will tend to dominate the media market and push out (or buy up) smaller media outlets.

So, how does something like this effect the United States economy? Well, there are several major factors and impacts that a large media conglomerate has on the economy. Large media companies create situations for reduced competition, job losses, and reduced diversity (which is unhealthy for the United States economy). All of these factors put together really highlight the negative effects that media conglomerates have on the economy.

According to an article published and fact checked by Investopedia titled, *The World's Top Media Companies,* " There are six very well-known companies that dominated the media market and the economy. Apple (market cap: \$2.74 trillion), Walt Disney (market cap: \$238.21 billion), Comcast (market cap: \$213.75 billion), Netflix (market cap: \$152.77 billion), AT&T (market cap: \$140.11 billion), and Sony (market cap: \$114.10 billion). These six companies own and dominate most of the (not all) of the media in the United States. Apple, the biggest media conglomerate, is known for its Apple products. However, they are also known for more than 100 acquisitions in the United States media market. The company acquired other companies such as Beats and Shazam. On top of this, Apple also has its own services such as Apple Music, Apple TV, Apple Books, etc.

While all of these large media outlets bring us lots of fun and entertainment, they can actually be quite detrimental to the United States economy. First off, these large media conglomerates reduce competition. When a media company, such as Disney, acquires a new media outlet, such as ESPN, this will reduce competition in the sports news reporting industry. It has allowed Disney to control most of the sports news reporting market. According to an article published by The White House titled, *The Importance of Competition for the American Economy,* "There is evidence that in the United States, markets have become more concentrated and perhaps less competitive across a wide array of industries (including the media industry),"

(Boushey and Knudsen). Then the article goes on to say, “When there is insufficient competition, dominant firms can use their market power to charge higher prices, offer decreased quality, and block potential competitors from entering the market—meaning entrepreneurs and small businesses cannot participate on a level playing field and new ideas cannot become new goods and services. Research has also connected market power to inequality. In an economy without adequate competition, prices, and corporate profits rise, while workers’ wages decrease. This means large corporations and their shareholders gain wealth, while consumers and workers’ pay the cost,” (Boushey and Knudsen). This research directly supports the point that reduced competition is bad for the United States economy. Reduced competition creates situations where large companies can start charging whatever they would like for their particular services. This is due to the fact that they *know* consumers will continue to pay for these services. Then, reduced competition can also result in fewer advertising options for advertisers. When a large media conglomerate owns most of a specific market, they will be able to set advertising prices to whatever they would like. This leads to higher costs for the advertisers who rely on this advertising to sell a product or service.

Another way that large media conglomerates harm the United States Economy is by job losses. When companies merge, the larger company is naturally going to start to alter the way the smaller company carries out its business. This includes the jobs and positions the smaller company has. For example purposes, let us take Disney and their merger with ESPN. When Disney took over ESPN, Disney wanted ESPN to operate just like the Disney corporation. Meaning, the high-level management at ESPN is going to have to make changes so they operate like a Disney company. Disney may get rid of roles and positions that they do not agree with at ESPN. This decreases jobs and hurts the economy. In a Harvard Business Review article titled, *Is*

Lack Of Competition Strangling the US Economy? It is stated that, “The preponderance of evidence across the proliferating body of research suggests that industry consolidation is causing a troubling decline in competition, limiting the country’s capacity to innovate, create jobs, and sustain overall economic health,” (Wessel). This article shows evidence that these large companies, who are reducing competition, will hurt job health in the United States. Job losses from reduced competition also come in the form of “not enough pay”. The lack of competition means that large companies can control what they are paying their employees.

Lastly, on top of job losses, large media conglomerates also create a reduction in the diversity of viewpoints and opinions presented in the media. Previously talked about in other sections in this essay, reduction in viewpoints also impacts the economy. When one company controls most of the media and news presented in a particular area, the company has the ability to create bias or slant stories towards the interest of the media company owners. This will limit the public’s access to diverse perspectives and limit the ability of individuals to make informed decisions that relate to our country’s economy. For example, a large media company such as NBC could create bias around the idea that it is smart to invest in a certain product. Due to the large control NBC and its parent company has over the market, NBC could sway its viewers to invest in a certain product, *even* if it is a bad idea.

In opposition to the claims I made, some people feel that large media conglomerates have more positives on our economy than negatives. In a study conducted by Stefano Della Vigna and Alec Kennedy, students at UC Berkeley, it was found that, “Using a data set of over half a million movie reviews from 1985 to 2011, we have shown that while media bias due to conflict of interest in conglomerates occurs, its extent is limited, presumably by the value of the reputation of the media outlets and the reviewers themselves,” (Della Vigna and Kennedy, p. 20).

This statement directly refutes the last claim we made that large media conglomerates create a reduction in the diversity of viewpoints. The study showed that while there is some bias for large media conglomerates, the bias is typically small, and it doesn't affect viewers much. In addition to this statement, it is also viewed by some that these large media conglomerates create jobs instead of creating job losses. When two companies combine, some believe that this allows for new job opportunities to emerge. Lastly, some also believe that these large media conglomerates will also allow for market stability. Due to the fact that these media conglomerates are so large, the companies provide stability to the market and are less likely to be impacted by economic changes. For example, since these large media conglomerates diversify their revenues in other media platforms, this diversification can mitigate the impact of economic downturns in any one particular sector.

Amongst some varying opinions from others, it is still believed and greatly supported that large media conglomerates will do more harm than good to our United States economy. These large media conglomerates create situations for reduced competition, job losses, and reduced diversity (which is unhealthy for the United States economy). The impact of all of these items together have been proven to do harm to our economy.

Tying everything together, the conglomeration of media companies does pose a serious threat to our culture, democracy, and economy in the United States. For our American culture, giant media has fed into and helped along the process of shutting down or ignoring information which they think to be incorrect or in which they do not believe. It is difficult to stray from the masses. Many outlets often end up telling viewers and listeners what they would like to hear to keep their numbers up and visitors happy. Then, for our democracy, diversity of thinking and independence is threatened when a few corporations and companies are in control of most of the

media. Our right to privacy is threatened by how much personal information is collected by these large media companies. Lastly, our American economy is also greatly impacted by media conglomerates. Large media companies create situations for reduced competition, job losses, and reduced diversity (which is unhealthy for the United States economy). The changes these large media conglomerates have made to our country is scary, and it'll be up to our generation to do something about it.

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