CHAPTER 8

How Mainstream Media Evolved into Corporate Media

A Project Censored History

Peter Phillips

Historically the term “mainstream media” referred to the largest media outlets in the United States. Numbering in the hundreds, these newspapers and broadcast media outlets collectively reached a majority of the public. That was certainly the case in 1976 when Carl Jensen founded Project Censored. His concern was that the mainstream press increasingly left out important news stories; and, with Project Censored student researchers, he began to produce annual reports of the most important news stories ignored by the mainstream media. From the original photocopied reports to the first of the Project’s yearbooks published in 1993, Project Censored referred to the US media collectively as the press, mass media, or mainstream media. In the Project’s 20th anniversary yearbook, Carl wrote, “The Censored Yearbook is published annually in response to a growing national demand for news and information not published nor broadcast by the mainstream media in America.”

In the 1980s two important analyses of how mainstream media was changing in the US transformed the study of media and communications. In 1982, when Ben Bagdikian completed research for his book, *The Media Monopoly*, he found that 50 corporations controlled at least half of the media business. By December 1986, when he finished revisions for the book’s second edition, the concentration of power had shifted from 50 corporations down to just 29. Bagdikian noted that 98 percent of the nation’s 1,700 daily newspapers were local monopolies, with fewer than 15 corporations controlling most of the country’s print media.
The second major turning point in the evolution of media studies was the publication of Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky’s book, *Manufacturing Consent*, in 1988. Herman and Chomsky claimed that, because media is firmly imbedded in the market system, it reflected the class values and concerns of its owners and advertisers. They reported that the media maintains a corporate class bias through five systemic filters they referred to as the “Propaganda Model”: concentrated private ownership; a strict bottom-line profit orientation; over-reliance on governmental and corporate sources for news; a primary tendency to avoid offending the powerful; and an almost religious worship of the market economy, strongly opposing alternative beliefs. These filters limit what becomes news in American society and set parameters on acceptable coverage of daily events.

In 1997, under my directorship and influenced by the research of Bagdikian, Herman, and Chomsky, Project Censored began to express the idea that mainstream media was in transition, becoming increasingly corporate and consolidated. In *Censored 1997*, Ivan Harsløf and I used the term “mainstream corporate media” to describe the continuing rapid consolidation of media in the US and the forms of censorship they imposed. We cited Herbert Schiller’s concerns in *Culture, Inc.* regarding the corporate takeover of public expression through the internationalization of media.

The following year, in *Censored 1998*, we took a strong stance against self-censorship, especially when organizational cultures within corporate media bureaucracies influence journalists’ choices and coverage of specific news stories. In addition, we researched the interlocking directorships of the six major media organizations, finding that 81 corporate directors (89 percent of whom were male) also held 104 director positions on the boards of businesses identified as *Fortune* 1,000 corporations. It was becoming very clear that what we had called mainstream media no longer existed, having transformed into simply corporate media.

In *Censored 1999* I wrote, “The US media has lost its diversity and ability to present different points of view.... Every corporate media outlet in the country spent hundreds of hours and yards of newsprint to cover Bill Clinton’s sexual escapades and in the process ignored many important news stories.” By the millennium, “main-
stream” media had entirely disappeared from the US as far as Project Censored was concerned. In its place arose an increasingly concentrated, controlled, and propagandized corporate structure that had abandoned the time-honored commitment to inform and serve the American people. To illustrate the extent of the media’s corporate transformation, in Censored 2006 a team of Project Censored student interns from Sonoma State University identified 118 board members of ten major US media organizations, from newspaper to television to radio, and traced their direct ties to other corporate boards. Based on this network analysis, the team concluded that “[i]n corporate-dominated capitalism wealth concentration is the goal and the corporate media are the cheerleaders.”

Today, after a dozen years of further consolidation, corporate media have become a monolithic power structure that serves the interests of empire, war, and capitalism. A chapter I co-authored with Ratonya Coffee, Robert Ramirez, Mary Schafer, and Nicole Tranchina for Censored 2017, titled “Selling Empire, War, and Capitalism: Public Relations Propaganda Firms in Service to the Transnational Capitalist Class,” laid bare how public relations propaganda, and corporate media more generally, work to promote capital growth as their primary goal through the “hegemonic psychological control of human desires, emotions, beliefs, and values.”

For those of us interested in opposing the destructive agenda of empires of concentrated wealth, it’s clearly time to stop using the term “mainstream media” when “corporate media” is both more accurate and revealing.


Notes


7. Ibid., 145.


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FIGHTING THE FAKE NEWS INVASION
The Top Censored Stories and Media Analysis of 2017–18
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