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"I may disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it."--Voltaire

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Media Giants Growing (and Shrinking)

A specter now haunts the world - a global commercial media system dominated by a small number of super-powerful, mostly U.S.-based transnational media corporations works as a system to advance the cause of the global market and promote commercial values, while denigrating journalism and culture not conducive to the immediate bottom line.

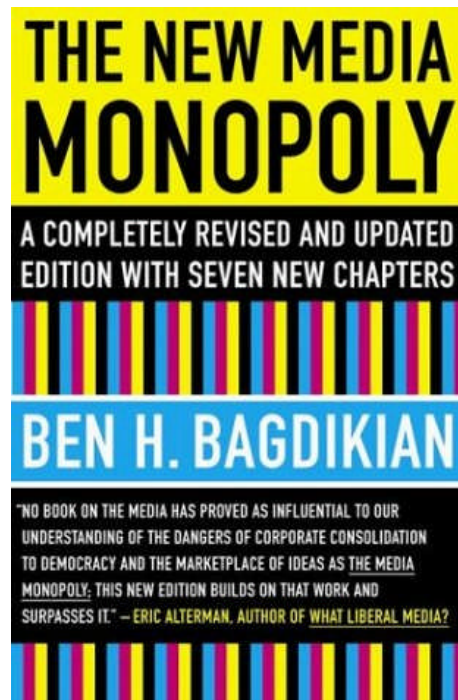
Review by Lynnea M. Bylund

"Everybody wants to rule the world," sang Tears for Fears in the '80s. Now, according to the media critic Ben Bagdikian, someone actually does: the captains of post-industry, who control the global media. In 1983, when Bagdikian published the first edition of "The Media Monopoly," his sobering announcement that media ownership was concentrated in the hands of a mere 50 transnational conglomerates shocked many readers. Skeptics dismissed the book as "alarmist."

Bagdikian's first edition, published in 1983, assailed the concentration of media ownership, finding that 50 companies dominated the newspaper, broadcast, magazine, book, and movie industries. These firms did the bidding of corporate America because, in Bagdikian's view, they were corporate America, their boards of directors interlocked with those of other major corporations.

Now, after the frenzy of mergers and acquisitions in the '80s and '90s, a 'media-monopoly' run by 50 firms looks virtually democratic. Today, the number of transnational firms who dominate the global media system has dwindled to five.

Why should we care? Because, according to some critics, these global media giants are sacrificing journalistic quality and ethics on the altar of shareholder returns. MBAs with no experience in---and little love for---journalism are downsizing news divisions and upping the fluff-to-fiber ratio in order to boost profits.



Ominously, some corporate parents are meddling in the newsroom, slipping product placement into news shows and censoring investigative reports that bite the hand that feeds. In the name of greater market share, they're fencing out diverse or dissenting voices, creating a bland media monoculture. They're privatizing the airwaves, blockading our right-of-way to the public sphere.

Most worrisome, some critics say, is the bottom-line agenda of global corporate media: profoundly anti-democratic, dedicated to advancing the interests of the power élite and keeping the rabble entertained and docile. Media moguls and the powers they serve want happy shoppers, not freethinking citizens, the argument goes.

Regardless of whether you agree, there's no denying that, in the Information Age, "media power is political power," as Bagdikian writes in "The Media Monopoly." When a handful of companies control much of what we watch, read, and listen to, it's time for us to take a long, hard look at the private powers who own our media windows on the world.

These companies, Bagdikian contends, have built a communications cartel within the United States. In this case, the group controls not just industrial products such as gasoline, refrigerators, or clothing, but the words and images that help to define and shape the culture and political agenda of the country. Essentially, the public is only exposed to the viewpoints and opinions of five corporations who have similar interests. Messages that do not fit within the attitudes, values, or revenue goals of these corporations get little, if any, exposure. Also, any information that is damaging to The Big Five or to other large corporations that they sympathize with may be repressed or given so little exposure that the public does not even notice it.

According to Bagdikian, the giant companies that control the media, therefore, have a great desire to do two things: (1) ensure that the parent company is never cast in a negative light, and (2) find ways to plant positive news items about the parent company.

Bagdikian details several examples in which journalists were fired and stories killed simply because the subject was in some way injurious or potentially injurious to the parent company. For instance, a survey by the American Society of Newspaper Editors found that 33% of all editors working for newspaper chains said they would not feel free to run a news story that was damaging to their parent firm. And, Bagdikian argues that some of these companies are so huge that they control innumerable assets in all areas of the media.

The New Media Monopoly is mostly important for both its investigation into inequitable corporate control of the media, and also Bagdikian's great insights into the ensuing political and cultural effects on society. Bagdikian makes a clear and effective case demonstrating how this media concentration subverts democracy.

The New Media Monopoly is an important and useful book that deserves to be read by anyone who thinks that our 500-channel cable universe and the Internet mean that we are living in a fully informed, democratic society. His general thesis, that media consolidation is antithetical to viewer interests, is beyond serious debate.

The New Media Monopoly gives a good overall perspective and history of media in the United States and it critically looks at the dangers inherent in the current monopolistic system where so few decide what the masses will know.

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