



How Corporate Media Mergers Weaken News Coverage

Matt Guardino, Providence College

The U.S. Justice Department dropped its legal action against the AT&T–Time Warner merger in the spring of 2019, clearing the way for the completion of this \$85.4 billion deal as one of the biggest corporate media mergers in U.S. history. In this arrangement, AT&T, a leading cable and telecommunications provider, would gain control over Time Warner’s vast production and distribution conglomerate, whose holdings include CNN and its digital platforms.

Although the Trump administration balked at this particular merger, it has generally weakened curbs on media ownership and business operations – continuing decades-long bipartisan trends toward deregulation. In tandem with changing technologies, this federal acceptance of media mergers is reshaping how we get our news. Technology has bolstered the diversity and quality of information available to Americans in many ways. However, the digital news outlets that command the greatest audience attention tend to follow the narrow sourcing practices of most corporate media. This means that online news outlets draw information and perspectives for their coverage from a small pool of people. This evolving media environment makes it harder for Americans to express sensible opinions on policy issues, especially if they are not intensely engaged in politics, highly educated, or financially well off. Everyone interested in broadening public knowledge and participation in ways that strengthen U.S. democracy should be concerned about these troubling patterns in the media landscape.

Commercial Threats to Quality Journalism

Although media mergers are often assessed strictly in business terms, critics argue that they diminish public debate and thus degrade the quality of democratic life. When control over the media is concentrated in fewer and fewer hands, owners may be able to use their corporations’ powerful platforms to amplify propaganda driven by their own political views or business interests. What is more, mergers may narrow the range of social and political ideas available – for example, exacerbating racial and gender inequities and giving voice to fewer kinds of people or perspectives.

Often overlooked, however, are the subtle ways media concentration can undermine the everyday work of journalists and hinder their coverage of critical policy issues. To reduce costs and boost advertising dollars for new owners, media mergers often lead to cuts in newsrooms staffing and to heightened pressures to produce commercially friendly stories. At the same time, the decline of the labor movement in the private sector has undermined news workers’ unions that have served as a bulwark for quality journalism. As corporations tighten their budgets, important journalistic practices and values become harder to sustain. Careful background research, diverse sourcing, innovative methods for storytelling and topic selection, and broad-minded reflection – all can become casualties in the new ownership environment.

The “Official Story” and News Sourcing

One way to measure news quality is to examine the selection of people who get opportunities to share their political and policy messages in the news. A more difficult but more important measure looks at varying perspectives and information. The default perspective offered by the news is typically voiced by a government official from an office relevant to the issue. Better coverage, by this measure, would include voices from a broader array of actors who could share independent perspectives. However, this type of coverage takes time and expertise, which are often in short supply in a cost-focused and fast-paced media business. To make matters worse, the inclusion of diverse sources can be commercially risky in the face of unrelenting pressure to attract revenue. To keep consumers tuned in, clicking, and sharing, newsrooms often prioritize fast and superficial reporting on the most dramatic actions and statements of well-known political figures.

My research shows that the best-known government officials – especially those who command major public relations resources – gain consistent influence on the policy information and ideas made available in the news. This turns out to be true when the issue is war, taxes, public assistance or health care. It holds when Democrats or Republicans are in office – and remains the case no matter how active policy organizations or citizen groups are on given issues. Whether the format is television or print, officials drive mainstream media coverage.

- Across five key debates over tax and social welfare policy from 1981 through 2017, government officials were fully 86.5 percent of the people quoted or paraphrased in popular newspapers and TV news coverage.
- In the months before the 2003 invasion of Iraq, nearly eight of every ten voices on network TV were officials. Even amid what were some of the largest pre-war demonstrations in world history, protesters against the Iraq invasion were responsible for less than one percent of statements on TV news.
- During the mid-1990s debates over revamping programs for low-income people, non-partisan policy experts and civil society groups constituted just one in ten news sources. People directly affected by welfare reform made up fewer than two percent of sources.

Strange as it may seem, the Internet has not broken the hold prominent officials have on popular news coverage and public policy discourse. In 2017, I pulled a sample from four major online news outlets and found that nearly 70 percent of their sources were officials. TV news still draws massive attention, especially among less educated and lower-income people, and the sheer number of eyeballs that see online stories from prominent corporate-owned news organizations dwarfs attention to credible online outlets that may offer more diverse or independent perspectives. Further, for many news organizations, newer media technologies have forced newsrooms to chase ad dollars across many avenues, thus increasing pressures toward cost cutting, speed and commercialism.

Ultimately, counteracting the march toward narrowly sourced and superficial coverage of public affairs may require government policies to modify the economic incentives facing media organizations. Promising strategies might include constraints on mergers and limits on advertising. Public funding for non-profit media might also encourage corporate outlets to improve their coverage. Absent changes like these, big media's worrisome impact on democracy is unlikely to diminish over time.

Read more in Matt Guardino, *Framing Inequality: News Media, Public Opinion, and the Neoliberal Turn in U.S. Public Policy*, Oxford University Press, (2019).