

MEDIA POLICY 101

**WHAT YOU NEED TO
KNOW TO CHANGE
THE MEDIA**

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Why Care About the Media?

Introduction

THE MEDIA PLAY A HUGE ROLE in our lives. The Internet, TV, radio, movies, books and newspapers inform our ideas, values and beliefs. Media are our prime source of news and information. They shape our understanding of the world; they are essential to our democracy.

But our media system is in crisis.

As you read this, the free and open Internet you access every day; the diverse, independent sources of news you rely on; and the public media that serve your local community are all at risk, endangered by years of bad public policies.

These policies – made in the public’s name but without our involvement – were drafted in Washington behind closed doors by powerful media corporations and their high-priced lobbyists.

That’s where you come in. If we want better media, we need better media policies.

It’s up to all of us to demand better media.



Big Media in Their Own Words

“If anyone said we were in the radio business, it wouldn’t be someone from our company. We’re not in the business of providing news and information. We’re not in the business of providing well-researched music. We’re simply in the business of selling our customers’ products.”

– Lowry Mays, former CEO of radio giant Clear Channel Communications

Symptoms of the Media Problem

People from all backgrounds and beliefs are concerned about the state of our media. You don't have to be a scholar or an expert to recognize the symptoms of our media problem. For example:

The news fails to inform.

Instead of quality journalism about vital issues, we get “infotainment,” sensationalism and celebrity gossip. Entertaining or dramatic stories that have no impact on our lives are presented as news, while key stories about social and political issues are left uncovered.

We see and hear the same stuff everywhere.

Local perspectives and culture are vanishing from the airwaves, so the media look and sound the same from Alaska to Florida.

Society is misrepresented.

What you see in the media doesn't look like the real world. We see stereotypes instead of nuance. Important issues and social groups are misrepresented or left out altogether.

Advertising is out of control.

We're bombarded with commercials, billboards and product placements. Entire movies and TV shows are made just to sell spin-off merchandise.

Internet access is too expensive.

Too many people are stranded on the wrong side of the digital divide, unable to access or afford a high-speed Internet connection.



Media in the U.S.A.

- The average American spends over 4 hours a day watching TV.¹
- 93 percent of American adults listen to radio every week.²
- 88 percent of online Americans say the Internet plays a role in their daily routine.³
- The average American teenager will spend more hours per year watching TV than in school.
- On average, an American child will view 40,000 commercials per year.⁴

Sources:

(1) Nielsen Media Research, (2) Radio Advertising Bureau, (3) Pew Internet & American Life Project, (4) Handbook of Children in the Media.

Profit Trumps the Public Interest

Most of the media that we see and hear is produced to make a profit – not necessarily to provide the information and quality entertainment we need.

Commercial media make money through advertising. So media companies create content that attracts the best audience for advertisers – not content that serves the best interests of the public.

- ▶ Controversial issues are ignored to keep advertisers happy.
- ▶ Entire segments of our population – African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, Native Americans, low-income people, rural populations, and others – are ignored or misrepresented.
- ▶ Local political affairs, viewed as a ratings loser, are ignored.
- ▶ TV networks rely on violent or sexually explicit programming to grab the most “eyeballs” and get the highest ratings.
- ▶ Cost-cutting in newsrooms results in less local reporting and investigative journalism.



The Numbers Speak for Themselves

**\$1
Billion+**

The amount the communications industry has spent to lobby Congress since 1998 ... that’s more than \$100 million a year.¹

**\$39
Million**

The amount AT&T has given in campaign contributions to members of Congress over the past decade.²

15

The international rank of the United States in broadband penetration, down from fourth place in 2001.³

**\$453
Billion**

The estimated worth of the publicly owned airwaves that are used by broadcasters at no cost.⁴

Sources:

(1,2) Center for Responsive Politics; Free Press Research, (3) “OECD Broadband Statistics to December 2006,” OECD, (4) New America Foundation, “The Citizen’s Guide to the Airwaves,” 2003.

A Handful of Corporations Control the Media

The federal policies that govern media ownership allow a handful of extremely powerful corporate giants to control the media industry. Through mergers and takeovers over the past few decades, major conglomerates have swallowed up independent outlets, reducing the diversity of voices in the media market while intensifying the conglomerates' influence.

Today's media owners not only decide what musical artists, TV programs and news reach us – but they also decide how much we pay for it, how it's distributed, and how we can use it. This gives them tremendous power. It's simple: You control the information, and you control the nation.



Independent Voices Are Fading

- Since 1975, two-thirds of independent newspaper owners and one-third of independent TV owners have disappeared. ¹
- Today, only one out of every five daily newspapers is published by an independent publishing company. ²
- Minority ownership of broadcast media remains at a dismal level — less than 8 percent of radio stations and a mere 3 percent of TV stations are owned by people of color. ³
- The number of radio station owners has plummeted by 35 percent since 1996, when media ownership rules were loosened, even as the overall number of stations increased by 6 percent. ⁴
- Nearly 99 percent of all residential broadband connections are provided by incumbent cable or telecom companies. ⁵

Sources:

(1) *Writers Guild of America – East*, (2) *BIA Financial*; *Free Press* research, (3) *Free Press* research, (4) "Review of the Radio Industry," *Federal Communications Commission, Media Bureau, Industry Analysis Division, September 2003*, (5) "High-Speed Services for Internet Access as of June 30, 2007," *Industry Analysis and Technology Division, Wireline Competition Bureau, Federal Communications Commission*.

The Public Is Shut Out of Media Policy Debates

Because of Big Media's tremendous influence in Washington, media policymaking has been a closed and secretive process, and citizens have been shut out of media policy debates. So even though we own the airwaves, *they* decide how media is created, financed and distributed.

In fact, we are so far from these debates that we often don't even hear when they are happening. Mainstream media conveniently ignore stories about media policy. They don't like to cover themselves: When Congress was voting to eliminate longstanding media ownership limits in 1996, the nightly newscasts on the major networks never once mentioned the Telecommunications Act. In fact, the act was only mentioned on national broadcast TV twice – by Ted Koppel on *Nightline* and by cartoon character Lisa Simpson on *The Simpsons*.

It's up to concerned citizens – that means you – to change the system. Don't forget that policymakers are public officials, and it's their job to serve the public interest. You have the power to hold them accountable; you deserve a say in policy debates about the media issues you care about.



Who Makes Media Policy?

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC)

- Regulates broadcasting, telephone, cable and satellite companies
- Enforces regulations and laws
- Ensures that those who use the airwaves serve the public interest

Congress

- Enacts media- and Internet-related legislation (mainly through the Senate Commerce and House Energy and Commerce committees)
- Appropriates funding for public broadcasting
- Approves FCC appointments, can overrule FCC regulations

The President

- Appoints FCC commissioners and other officials
- Can veto media-related legislation
- Sets policy goals for the FCC, proposes media-related budgets

The Courts

- Judge the constitutionality of laws and FCC rules
- Interpret the First Amendment and copyright law

State and Local Governments

- Pass legislation governing cable TV and phone companies
- Negotiate "franchise agreements" with cable and phone companies to provide public access TV channels, Internet service, and equipment
- Can deploy or fund projects to provide community Internet access

Global Institutions

- Can implement trade agreements that promote or undermine local, state, and national protections for media ownership and diversity

Industry Lobbies

- Pressure elected and appointed leaders, fundraise for candidates
- Influence elected officials' access to airtime and media coverage

Public Interest Groups

- Lobby, propose legislation, educate, activate, protest and influence policymaking

Media Policy Basics

Influence and Media Policy

BIG MEDIA has one of the most powerful special interest lobbies in Washington. In 2006, they spent more money on lobbyists than any other industry, including the drug and oil companies. These lobbyists try to influence policymakers in Washington to enact policies that will increase Big Media profits, not serve the public interest.

Through their massive lobbying, Big Media wields enormous influence in Washington. Media policy is made behind closed doors. In fact, several sections of the disastrous Telecommunications Act of 1996 were actually *written* by media industry lobbyists. That kind of corrupt process is unacceptable in a democracy.

A Few Key Points

Our media system is complex, with many different types of media – print, broadcast and the Internet – and different rules that apply to each. It’s important for activists to know the basics. Here are a few key points on U.S. media policy:

Role of the First Amendment

The First Amendment protects free speech and freedom of the press. That means that media outlets – television and radio stations, newspapers, Web sites – are free to choose whatever kind of content they want. Congress can make laws to cover all sectors of the media system, but the First Amendment generally prohibits government from regulating content.

Public property and public responsibility

Some types of media use public property to distribute their messages.

For instance, TV and radio stations broadcast over the public airwaves, and your mobile phone uses them, too. Cable and phone companies dig up public roads to lay their wires. Because these companies have been entrusted with invaluable public resources, they have a legal obligation to serve the public. Congress and the FCC can dictate how they do so.

Different media, different rules

There are different regulations for different types of media. The more dependent a media sector is on public property, the more power the government has to enact public interest provisions. So the government has virtually no power to make rules for newspapers, but considerable power to regulate broadcast TV and radio because these media get to use public airwaves for free.



A Little History

When radio first began, it looked very different from the way it does today. In the 1920s, a third of all stations were run by nonprofit groups. Many other stations sold airtime to citizens for their own use.

In fact, less than 5 percent of radio stations could be considered commercial, making money through advertising.

But in 1927, the Federal Radio Commission (FRC) was formed to divvy up space on the radio airwaves. Influenced by emerging commercial broadcasters, FRC policymakers made numerous policy decisions favoring for-profit stations over nonprofit and community stations.

The result? Nonprofit stations dropped from 33 percent of stations to only 2 percent. Advertising went from being a marginal trend to a huge industry. In just a few years, CBS and NBC became immensely powerful and profitable national media chains. The moral of the story: Policies shape the system, and we must shape these policies!

Who Owns the Airwaves?

Believe it or not, we all do!

The public airwaves are the transmission frequencies used by radio, TV and satellite broadcasters, cell phone companies, Wi-Fi routers – even your TV remote control – to transmit signals.

Although the airwaves are used for many different purposes, they ultimately belong to you – the American public – in the same way that your sidewalk or your local park belongs to you. The airwaves are a public resource.

Some businesses, like cell phone companies, pay the government to use the airwaves (also called “spectrum”). Radio and TV broadcasters, though, use these airwaves free of charge. In return for this generous government handout, broadcasters are required by law to serve the public interest.

Even though citizens own the airwaves, we’ve often been shut out of debates over how these airwaves should be used. But because the airwaves belong to us, we have a legitimate platform from which we can change the rules and change the media.

Media Policy Priorities

The System Isn't Inevitable.

MOST PEOPLE ASSUME that our media system developed naturally as the result of market forces. They're wrong. The system didn't develop in response to market forces. Instead, it's the direct result of policies made by Congress and the FCC in Washington.

In crafting communications policy, policymakers face choices: How will the system operate and whom will laws and regulations benefit? Our current policies have created a system that benefits giant media corporations at the expense of average Americans and their need for information and diverse viewpoints.

If we want to improve the media and create a more diverse and democratic system that serves the public interest, then we need to change media policies.

Change the Rules, Change the Media.

Citizen activism *can* affect policy. We can't match the massive funds of the big industry lobbies, but as voters, citizens and constituents, we also have the power to influence policymakers. We can match Big Media's market power with people power. If we change the rules, we can change the media!

Motivated citizens from across the country need to join the movement for better media. The next section will tell you how you can have an impact.

Public Interest Media Policies

Ensure diverse and democratic media ownership

Rampant media consolidation has led to the decline of quality journalism and the elimination of diverse, local, independent voices. Now the handful of huge conglomerates that dominate our media want to rewrite the rules so they can get even bigger. Congress and the FCC need to block further market concentration and diversify media ownership.

Preserve Internet freedom

Soon nearly all media – TV, phone, radio and the Web – will be delivered over the Internet. A broadband connection is fast becoming a basic public necessity, just like water or electricity. We need to enact a national broadband policy to provide universal, affordable broadband access to all Americans. Congress and the FCC need to protect “Net Neutrality” – the principle that prevents phone and cable companies from discriminating against Web sites and services they don’t own.

Protect public media

Citizens and policymakers need to prevent political interference at PBS and NPR and support a vibrant public and noncommercial media sector. That means obtaining long-term funding for public and noncommercial media – including television, low-power and community radio, public access programming, and independent publications and Web sites.



Public Interest Media Policies

Support quality journalism

We rely on the media for the news and information we need to hold elected and corporate leaders accountable. But media consolidation has squeezed newsrooms, shuttered foreign bureaus, and put countless journalists out of work. Hard-hitting news and in-depth local coverage have been replaced by celebrity chatter, shouting pundits and other fluff. We need to sustain quality journalism and support the individuals and institutions that produce it.

Pursue media justice

Media is a civil rights issue. People of color, women, youth, and other disenfranchised communities have long been shut out of our country's media. They're not represented on the public airwaves. We need to foster public policies that promote media diversity, strengthen laws and regulations to support minority ownership, eliminate institutional biases in media content, and ensure fair and accurate representation for all communities.



What You Can Do

Become a Free Press e-activist.

Get e-mail alerts and updates that will tell you what you can do to change the media. To sign up, go to www.freepress.net.

Talk to your legislators in Congress.

Calls and letters really do make a difference in getting members of Congress to pay attention to media issues that matter. At www.freepress.net/policy_updates/congress_center, you can find contact information for your elected officials and learn about important legislation. You can also call the U.S. Capitol switchboard at (800) 614-2803 and ask to speak to the office of your senator or representative.

Organize!

There's an old saying that the only way to beat organized money is with organized people. Every time you sign a petition, call your senator, post to your blog, or write a letter to the editor about the media, encourage your friends and family to do the same. Make media an issue for the groups in which you're already active.

Get involved locally.

Many media policy issues are local issues. You can protest the renewal of a local broadcaster's license, negotiate with cable companies for public access channels and lower rates, or get your city or county to develop a community Internet project.

Join a media reform group.

Local activists are banding together across the country to fight for better media. They host events, meet with local media, organize rallies and educate the public. To see a list of groups working on media reform near you, check out: www.freepress.net/org_directory.

Can't find a local group? Start your own!

Speak out for democratic and diverse media.

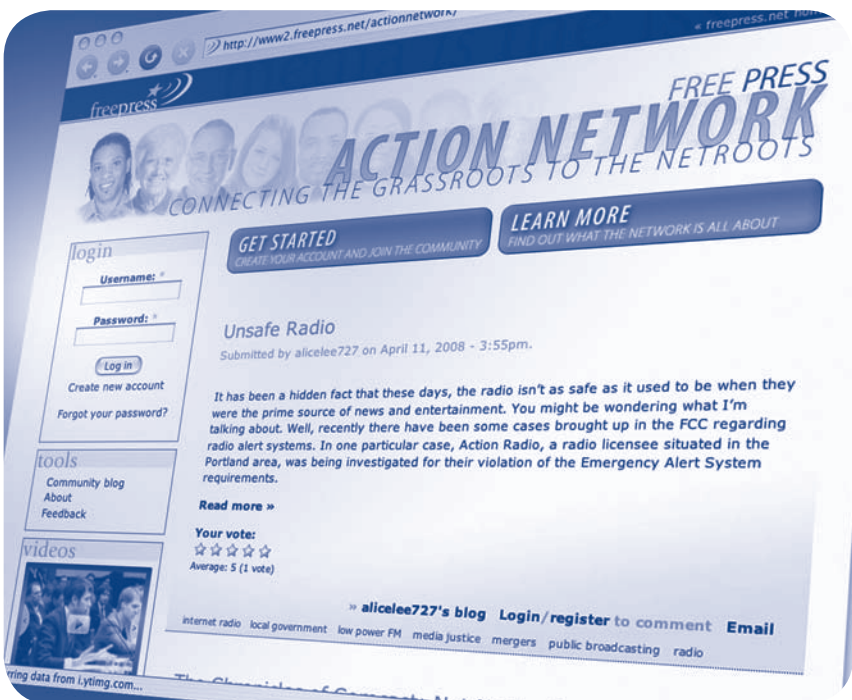
Talk to your friends, family, and colleagues about building better media. Write about it; talk about it; go to local events. If your issues aren't getting covered, you can make your own media. Start a blog or create videos and tell the story of what's happening in your community. Spread the word!

Join the Free Press Action Network.

The Free Press Action Network is the new hub for media activism on the Web.

This exciting online resource allows users to discuss the latest media reform news, connect with other activists around the country, take action on the latest campaigns, watch videos and much more. Media activists from across the country have already joined the conversation.

Help amplify the chorus of motivated people who are taking action on media issues that matter. Check out the Free Press Action Network at: www.freepress.net/action.



Support the Free Press Action Fund

The Free Press Action Fund is the lobbying and advocacy arm of Free Press. While Free Press conducts the broader education and organizing work of building a media reform movement, the Free Press Action Fund does the heavy lifting.



That includes lobbying Congress and the FCC, funding our staff and office in Washington, filing lawsuits and legal complaints, and making possible the aggressive public interest advocacy necessary to effect real change in media policymaking.

Free Press Action Fund is a member-supported organization. While the big media conglomerates have billions, we have you. Contributions of any size make a real difference. To join, visit: <http://www.freepress.net/donate> (it's quick and secure) or complete and mail this form, along with a check made payable to *Free Press Action Fund*, to:

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Free Press is a national, nonpartisan organization working to reform the media. Through education, organizing and advocacy, we promote diverse and independent media ownership, strong public media, and universal access to communications.

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media policy 101

Learn the basics about media policy, who makes the rules and what **you can do** to change the system.



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