

The Problem of No-Effects of Media Concentration

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In his classical work *Social Control in the Newsroom*, Warren Breed (1955) demonstrated how publishers would act in order to make journalists comply with his political views. The publishers worldview would be conveyed in a number of ways – either directly through the publishers articles, his public appearances or direct intervention in the newswork, or indirectly by structures and habits in the newsroom, by the priorities made during the day and the talk about the final product. Journalists would also notice that newspeople adapting to the publishers values would benefit from getting better assignments, maybe better pay and would also get leading positions.

In Breeds world, USA in the 1950s, the newspaper as medium had not yet started its decline and the big corporate owners were still of less importance in most local markets. But things would change. During the 1970s, it became evident that the newspaper was a medium for which the trend was pointing downwards in the US. More and more households would drop the subscription of the local daily. The percentage of adults reading newspapers steadily declined from 80 percent in 1970 to 62 percent in 1990 (Bogart 1991:272).

Simultaneously newspaper chains were growing faster and faster. Taxation, lack of competence or disinterest, family struggle and the high price level of newspapers are reasons mentioned for newspaper-owning families to sell their newspapers to the chains (Bogart 1991:49). It is more profitable to make money from consolidating existing newspapers than from growing into new markets.

What is the relevance of these American observations for the rest of us? The Norwegian press historian Svennik Høyer concludes that the general development of the press is the same in USA, Great

Britain, Denmark and Norway (1995:261). This is of course very simplified, and only valid in a very general historical context. E.g. when it comes to general penetration of the newspaper, Norway, Sweden and Finland is lagging, since newspapers still are read by more than 80 percent of the population. But the process of concentration in the newspaper business have undergone a more rapid development, especially in Norway than in the USA. This has also caused concerns in most European countries (Mångfaldsrådet 1997:2). Here I shall briefly mention the current aspects in the Nordic countries.

In Sweden as early as in 1980 a governmental committee was appointed to deal with the problem of mediaconcentration. The committee never succeeded in its attempt to introduce new legislation in the field (SOU 1980:28). Fourteen years later a less ambitious report was presented (SOU 1994:145), and a public committee was set up to watch and analyze the development of the media when it comes to diversity and freedom of speech (Mångfaldsrådet 1997:2). In Norway public committees in 1988 and 1995 presented reports discussing the topic (NOU 1988:36 and 1995:3), and by Spring 1998 an independent body regulating all media acquisitions will start working. In Finland the government has tried to hinder cross-ownership, while in Denmark there seemingly is much less discussions on the matter. Still, a joint-Nordic project was initiated by the Nordic Council in order to look a bit closer into the matters (Cavallin 1993).

The political concerns and the fact that concentration is increasing, have so far not had only limited influence upon the Nordic and European research in the field. That is another reason for turning to American research: Here is where the em-

pirical research have been carried out. The American research might have flaws, but European research in the field is almost non-existent.

European research should be aware of the shortcomings of the American research and elaborate designs which more appropriately can face the challenges the changes in the industry puts forward for research. For research to get even with the new situation, one must apply other methods and perspectives than Breed turned to forty years ago. The players have moved out of the local publishers office, and into the corporate headquarters. The focus of the research should follow the same route.

Concentration and Politics

In mediaeconomics concentration is regarded as the outcome of unequal growth within an industry (Penrose 1959, quoted in Gustafsson 1995), thus leading some, a few or one company into a high level of control, while others are driven out of competition or into a dependency of the larger companies. This is a very general model, applicable to almost any industry.

In a media-centred context the concept of media concentration might be applied to the links in the general model of mass-communication (DeRidder quoted in McQuail 1993), one can speak of concentration on the sender, content and audience part of the model. But is the sender the owner or each and every newspaper the corporation controls?

In the Nordic discussion it has been suggested to differ between owners and companies: Concentration of ownership and market concentration. In a country, there might be few or many owners, and in the local markets within the country there might be few or many companies. When few owners control the few existing companies – monopoly or oligopoly exists. If the few owners control many newspaper, one faces the classical chain situation. The situation where many owners control few or many companies seemingly is a theoretically based constructions. The many owners – few companies is attributed to cooperative arrangements, which hardly exists anywhere in the world. But the situation where many owners controls many companies, one might approach the perfect competition or maybe the true variety situation. Neither this is easily found today. The model is suggested by the Swedish media professor Lennart Weibull (Mångfaldsrådet 1995:1).

Rolland (quoted in Sánchez-Taberner 1993:6) have also suggested a company – industry dichotomy.

Rolland suggests to use the concept integration at the company level, while concentration is to be applied at the industry level. This will of course obscure the fact that companies, like newspapers, might be low on integration, but still be the only newspaper in the market. This perspective has also been picked up and elaborated by Lange and Van Loon (quoted in Mångfaldsrådet 1995:1, page 24).

Applying the perspectives to a “real life” setting, one can observe that both at the local market as well as in the national setting, the overall tendency is towards fewer and fewer owners as well as companies. Local concentration is mostly a question of driving local competitors out of the business, and this has happened to a great extent. Most towns are being served only by one newspaper. Nationally the big chains or corporations are acquiring smaller chains and independent newspapers – preferably newspapers with a dominant position in the market.

Internationally the global players are to some extent building global empires – but mostly within their own cultural sphere. E.g. the largest fish in the pond, Rupert Murdoch and his news corp., mostly owns newspapers in Australia, USA and Great Britain. This pattern also applies to the experience in the Nordic countries. The global players are almost not present, especially not in the newspaper industry. The Nordic newspaper corporations invest in newspapers in other Nordic countries. However, in Eastern Europe all global players are present – also Swedish, Norwegian, Danish and Finnish companies.

One might ask why it is necessary to carry out all the hairsplitting discussion of concepts, when the industry at an increasing pace is experiencing dramatical changes. The local concentration is a process almost completed in most markets, while the global concentration for newspapers still have a long walk. The currently developing national concentration should thus be at the focus of interest, and is what is referred to when concentration is mentioned later on in this article.

Invisible Ownership

Family based companies and one-man corporations are visible – the corporation not necessarily is so. There are a number of studies of Rupert Murdoch, maybe the most visible contemporary media-tycoon. Not all these studies consider him being a maniac (Coleridge 1993), but the majority do consider him being brutal and scrupulous in his profit-

draining efforts, as well as an owner of low-taste publications, into which he turns also some of his former middle-class newspapers.

Media research have not produced significant studies of media empires – such studies have been performed to a great extent by former editors and journalists (e.g. Squires (1993), Ghiglione (1984), McCord (1996) etc.).

The main problem for research, is thereby that vital (contextual) data on the very objects of interest is lacking. There is a widespread overall tendency to treat all chains as equals, and clearly, they are not. Thus it makes no sense to present data only dealing with chains vs. non-chains, as Beam also suggests (Beam 1993, Matthews 1996).

What do we know of the different chains? A number of case-studies have showed that publishing or journalism-oriented owners consider chains being different when they are discussing who shall be the new owner of the newspaper they are selling. The differences seem to go along lines of journalistic commitment vs. willingness to soar profit. Clearly, high quality journalism is costly, and thus reduces profit – at least this is a commonly held belief within the industry (Demers 1996, Matthews 1996)

Matthews (1996) shows that managers of publicly and privately owned newspapers had different levels of autonomy in matters of staffing and major content changes (adding sections, subscribing to news wires, hiring/firing staff). Still, it is hard to assess whether these differences may be ascribed to the formal structure of the still very large organisations, or whether the chains policies are the real cause of such effects. Still, the need for a more in depth analysis of the different chains is a step in the right direction.

The chains emphasising journalism are mostly the chains connected to high-quality newspapers: *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times* and *Knight Ridder*. Companies being regarded high-profit seekers on the expense of high-quality journalism are chains like Gannett, Thomson, Ingersoll and Newhouse. Typically, they will pay more for a newspaper than their more quality-oriented competitors, but in order to make this high price being a good investment, the newspaper will virtually be plundered once it is acquired. There are a few cases describing this process (Ghiglione 1984), but some of the investors also speaks straight-forward about this (Coleridge 1993).

What is considered being a trend is that the quality-minded chains seemingly are forced to

adopt the strategies of the profit-oriented chains – possibly at the expense of journalistic standards (*American Journalism Review*, jan./feb. 1996).

Empirical Research: An Overview

In order to present a more systematic overview of the research in the field, I will here differ between projects by temporal span and by object of research. The temporal span is of two kinds: Contemporary (i.e. no historical perspective in the data collection) and before-after studies, e.g. before and after a newspaper have been acquired by a chain. The object of research might be one single newspaper or newspapers within a chain, or different kinds of newspapers. Comparisons of chain-newspapers and independent ones is a quite common design.

What knowledge have been gained by the different perspectives? I will here briefly describe some typical studies within each of the four approaches. The studies have been picked mainly from the journals *Journalism Quarterly* and *Newspaper Research Journal* after a search in “communication abstracts” for the keywords newspaper management, newspaper economics, newspaper industry and media ownership. I have no intention of pretending my list to be complete in any way, but I hope my study establishes an overview in the field.

1) Studies of Single Newspapers or Chains: Gannett as Case

One might ask, how is a chain run? And where does corporate management put the local managers and journalists? These kinds of studies are yet to come. In order to demonstrate what kind of material exist, and what problems is connected to the available sources, I have tried to compile writings on Gannett, the largest newspaper chain in the USA.

A chapter in Ben H. Bagdikians famous book: *The Media Monopoly*, first published in 1983, is dedicated to the Gannett, and foremost its ability and willingness to create myths regarding its freedom ideology and how it is carried out in its operations. The chapter can also be read as a fascinating, and of course biased, story of the leadership exerted at the top-level of Gannett. Foremost by the (now) former president, CEO and chairman of Gannett, Al(len H.) Neuharth. One of the most quoted anecdotes about Neuharth stems from the fact that Mr. Neuharth used to wear a sharkskin suit, and no one really were sure where the shark stopped and Mr. Neuharth began.

Bagdikian combines in his analysis three sets of data: Gannett's own promotional advertisements, speeches delivered by Mr. Neuharth, analysis of take-overs, and elusive reports from Gannett's presentation of the company to the analysts of Wall Street. Clearly, the image presented of Gannett in the three different settings do differ. Where the PR material as well as the speeches told the story of Gannett as a company devoted to quality local journalism, the individual freedom, including its own, local editors, in practice several cases seemingly contradicted this image of reality.

The cases mentioned are Salem Oregon, where Gannett in 1974 seemingly drove a competitor, a local weekly, out of business by using unethical business-methods. In another case from 1970 Gannett exaggerated the circulation of a newspaper, sold it and later lost the trial when the new owner sued the company. According to McCord (1996:147-150), the unhappy buyer came out short in the final verdict – Gannett lost less from the fine than they would have if not selling the paper.

The journalist first presenting the Salem story, Richard McCord, have later on presented his own story (*The Chain Gang*) how he got hold of the secret material from the trial, as well as how he presented it in his Santa Fe newspaper, threatened by the local Gannett paper, and how he later used his knowledge in order to help a local chain in Wisconsin in an effort to fight off Gannett (McCord 1996).

Bagdikian as well as McCord and Peter Katel (1984) have presented the story of how Gannett bought the New Mexican of Santa Fe, violated the agreement of the former owner to continue as CEO and editor, and later on lost the lawsuit he raised against Gannett.

There do also exist to books from insiders, to some extent telling the story of Gannett: Peter Prichard's book: *The Making of McPaper, the Inside Story* (1987). The book describes in detail the devotion and hard work by the young staff creating a new newspaper, but can hardly be considered being a piece of research.

Donald J. Brandt has written *A History of Gannett 1906-1993*, (1993) but this official corporate history is naturally not at all critical of Gannett. E.g. is the problems in Santa Fe, where Gannett was sentenced to return the New Mexican to the former owner because of violation of agreements of operation. In Brandt's history the acquisition is described in four lines in this 600-pages book.

Allen Neuharth, the CEO of Gannett in its most intense period of growth and during the launch of

USA Today have written an autobiography: *Confessions of an S.O.B.* (1989). This strange autobiography folds out Mr. Neuharth's view – mostly upon Mr. Neuharth, but also his business-principles and ideas for the industry. Though with more than one layer of make-up. The controversies in Portland, Santa Fe and Green Bay have not been mentioned.

All these last books convey important knowledge of the Gannett, and is a natural point of departure for students and scholars doing research on Gannett – but these books are definitely not examples of research themselves.

Most of the books also deal almost exclusively with the business side of the enterprise. The way the editorial operations is carried out is not discussed in much detail.

In American Journalism the Pulitzer prize is considered being the ultimate recognition of good journalism. What chains own the winning newspapers or the newspapers where journalists are awarded? The last three years (1995-1997) 25 of totally 42 prizes have been awarded to the traditional quality-newspapers. The Gannett did not win a single prize during these three years.

14 prizes have been awarded newspapers outside the top-layer. Some of them are rather small. But no prizes were awarded to eg. USA Today, the second largest newspaper in the US.

This low number of prizes is hardly a surprise when reading Mr. Neuharth's opinion of the Pulitzer prize. Neuharth plainly writes that the hunt for Pulitzer prizes might distract editors from doing a good job for the local community (Neuharth 1989:256-257). Then goes on by mentioning that Gannett until 1989 won 37 prizes – some before, and some after being Gannett newspapers, though the vast majority of these prizes were won before Gannett's acquisition.

My main point is that it is very hard to trust the official sources and the insiders of a company like Gannett. I have no idea whether the company would approve researchers to approach the newspaper, but nevertheless this is what researchers must do.

2) Comparisons of Newspapers or Chains

This is quite an intuitive way of finding out what is the consequences of concentration of ownership: How does corporate newspapers differ from independent ones. Other studies have tried to compare different kinds of newspapers according to kind of ownership – private or public.

Editors and Editorials:

Akhavan-Majid et.al. (1991, 1995) compared Gannett newspapers to independent newspapers and found that editors of the chain newspapers would be less afraid of putting on an activist role, but also found that the vast majority of Gannett newspapers would support the similar views. The data were collected by surveys.

Demers (1993) found editors at large and chain-owned papers had more autonomy and freedom to improve editorial content than editors at smaller and independent newspapers. There were no significant differences between chain-owned and independent ownership.

Political Views:

Wackman et.al. (1975) found that in the presidential elections 1960-1972 the chains more or less were "overwhelmingly homogenous" when it comes to presidential endorsement.

For the presidential elections from 1972 to 1988, Gaziano (1989) found that the degree of homogenousness was less overwhelming, and she related this finding to the fact that chains had grown in number of newspapers affiliated.

The same tendency towards less homogenous chains was also found by Busterna and Hansen (1990) in a study of 1,500 newspapers stand in the presidential election years 1976, 1980 and 1984. Newspapers in general supported the Republicans about 80 percent of the time, but group-owned newspapers were not different from other newspapers.

Prices:

Busterna (1988, 1991) have studied the chain Gannetts prices for advertising, and have found that Gannett is charging more than independent newspapers do. He suggests that power is more important than managerial ability in setting prices – Gannett is exploiting its market position.

Content:

Glasser et.al. (1989) looked at the coverage of the Gary Hart story. They found that the Knight-Ridder chain-papers gave more and better play to the story than other newspapers subscribing to the Knight-Ridder service, but not being owned by the company.

Wagenberg and Soderlund (1975) found that within one specific chain, the editorials were aligned in political matters during the 1972 election.

Other Perspectives:

Beam (1993) have found that when it comes to a wide range of organizational practices, size is more important than chain dependency or not. Beams data stemmed from a survey answered by senior- and middle level managers in 60 American dailies. Busterna (et.al) (1991) have compared the use of library resources between chain newspapers and independent ones, and have not found any substantial differences between the two groups. Demers (1988) found no difference in polling practices between independent and chain-owned newspapers.

Underwood and Stamm (1992) found a general tendency towards reader-oriented and market driven journalism in a sample consisting of 12 newspapers. 429 journalists and managers were interviewed, and the chain-newspapers would have the strongest tendency towards reader- and market oriented journalism.

3) Before-After Studies of Newspapers

What happens when a newspaper is bought by a corporation? This question has been studied in some cases. A close relative when it comes to design, is studies of newspapers changing from a competing market situation to the status of local monopoly, conf. the discussion of local vs. national concentration.

Content:

Coulson and Hansen (1995) looked into the news content of *The Louisville Courier-Journal* which was bought by Gannett. They found that the amount of news substantially increased, but the average length dropped. It was also registered a decline of hard news, and newswire material exceeded staff-written material.

Romanow and Soderlund (1988) performed a before-after study of the Canadian newspaper *The Globe and Mail*, which was acquired by the Thomson group in 1980. A content analysis of 96 issues showed that the changes in content were not substantial, and the significant changes was in accordance with adjustments of the newspapers profile, initiated by the new owner.

A Gannett experiment with a local Florida newspaper was studied by Smith et.al. (1988). The newspaper decided to drop the international and national news coverage, turning into an exclusively local newspaper. It maybe isn't too surprising that the content analysis observed a drop in interna-

tional and national material ... The main finding was that the mix of news stories swung towards crime and disasters. This could be an effect of the wish to make a local newspaper look like *USA Today*.

The same Gannett-swing towards local news was observed by Plopper (1991) as Gannett took over *The Arkansas Gazette* in the midst of a bitter newspaper war. The new management tried to change the content in order to satisfy reader interest. This meant a decrease of national and international material, and an increase of local/state news. The efforts did not significantly change the competitive situation in the market.

Thrift (1977) looked at the editorials in 24 dailies changing from independent to chain-newspapers between 1960 and 1975. The result indicated chain papers had fewer argumentative editorials in controversial contexts on local topics.

Ghiglione (1984) edited a collection of case-studies of take-overs of smaller and larger chains. The cases were written by journalists with different kinds of perspectives and methods applied. Thereby the books is only of limited value for research.

4) *Before-After Studies of Different Kinds of Newspapers*

These kinds of studies are few, and the main reason is probably the sources needed.

Hale (1991) looked into the ownership – newswire relation, and found that chain papers are not different from independent papers. The chain newspapers were more likely to subscribe to the news service delivered by the chain. An interesting methodological feature of Hales study was the fact that he compared newspapers with a time-span of five years, and in the sample of newspapers were 60 independent and 60 chain newspapers, as well as 60 former independent newspapers being bought by chains. Newswire subscription is a very simple variable to conduct, and the study possibly could indicate that it is hardly an important variable.

Pasadeos and Renfro (1988) compared issues of *The New York Post* from before and after its purchase by Rupert Murdoch. More visuals, “sensational” headlines, “sensational” stories and “local/regional” stories were found in “after” issues of the Post. The changes could be attributed to the purchase, because the competing *The Daily News* was not found to have changed much in the same period of time. Findings were generally similar to those obtained in a study of Murdoch’s *San Antonio Daily* and its competitor.

By this way of chopping up the existing research, one might easily get the general impression that the research is quite obsessed with counting. This is in accordance with my general view. There is nothing wrong with counting, but I question whether the counting is made properly as long as the knowledge of the chains is very limited.

How to Interpret the Findings

A decade has passed by since Gerald F. Stone summed up the findings of the research in the field of effects of concentration: No substantial findings connecting directly the big chains with any specific contemporary trend in journalism (Stone 1987). The same conclusion was also reached by Picard (et.al.) (1988), Lacy et.al. (1989) said research was inconclusive and later on Underwood (1993) and David Pearce Demers (1996) have observed the same lack of conclusive findings. The studies presented here applies to the same conclusion.

As long as we don’t know how chain policies are carried out, it is hard to know what is the real force behind change or no-change. This applies both when it comes to comparing chains with independent newspapers (e.g. Thrift 1977, Beam 1993, Underwood 1993, Coulson 1994), as well as in comparisons of publicly and privately owned chains (Hirsch and Thompson 1994, Matthews 1996).

Inconclusive data, how is that dealt with? Demers answer to the problem is as follows: Corporate newspapers (newspapers owned by corporations) are not harmful to traditional journalistic values, to freedom of speech and not bad for business. Quite contrary, newspapers being owned by a non-local corporations are more free to criticize local authorities and are relatively autonomus, corporate newspapers have more diversity of opinions than independent ones (this is measured by a content analysis of letters to the editor in different newspapers), and increase in prices for advertising is explained by chains better competence in order to evaluate the potential of the local market.

I will here point to methodological problems in Demers perspective. The first addresses the fact that he has collected his data by surveys of local managers, secondly he has not studied the corporations policy. The first problem is important because one can not know to what extent the managers would answer the surveys strategically – being aware of the criticism directed towards corporate newspapers. The other problem is more in accordance with my main theme in this paper: The corporation – manager relation is a missing link. One can hardly

study effects of chains or corporations without first getting an idea of what the chain actually do.

I will point to five reasons, or obstacles for media-research in this area:

- 1) The process of concentration deals with a large number of units, and is not a process being narrowed by a short timespan. In Television, the US market have until recently been dominated by three large networks. In Europe, the national broadcasters have been dominating. Thus the structure of the business (or service) have made it very easy to get the big picture. There is not a great many institutions to study. In the newspaper business the big picture is quite a different one. National newspapers share some of the same features as national broadcasters, but the main parts of the market consist of local based newspapers, with local identity and traditions. It is not easy, it is actually time-consuming and expensive, to grasp in depth knowledge of a high number of newspapers.
- 2) It is hard to get access to data. Reports on financial as well more general reports on the business' whereabouts is considered being vital to be kept secret, and is thus kept away from researchers, an observation also made by Underwood (1993).

In the Nordic Countries (and to some extent Northern Europe) some business data is accessible for every citizen – also without the company's consent. And even though chains owns the most of their newspaper 100 percent, each newspaper is still organised as an independent company with the responsibility to deliver an independent and thorough annual report on as well general as financial matters. Media researchers have mostly ignored this kind of data.
- 3) Research and education is to a great extent financed by media – and media don't want critical research examining media. This has both direct as well as indirect consequences. Directly the industry don't want to support critical media research, and researcher as well as research might suffer from this. Indirectly the industry might

chose to support or not to support the educational system which the researchers also is a part of. Support and non-support might be applied on a whole range of fields, stretching from direct financial support for buying new equipment or new buildings, supplying visitors from the industry, accepting students for short- or long term visits or research programs etc. This point has also been put forward by Hale.¹

This point of criticism should foremost be addressed to American research, since very small parts of funding for media research in the Nordic countries is paid by the business.

- 4) The question is not theoretically challenging. The current trends when it comes to theory and research practice, is not in favour of empirical studies of matters which theorists already "knows" the answers of. Well known critics like Bagdikian (1992) and Herman and Chomsky (1994) have by the use of grande theories portrayed an image of the problem that is easy to grasp and surely fits nicely into many supporters worldview. But parts of the empirical research they convey could be described as anecdotal.
- 5) The changing media landscape is not compatible with the traditional boundaries of media research. Sociology of news needs to be expanded into the realm of politics and economy in order to get a grip of the structures surrounding the newsroom.

Studies like Lacy et.al. (1989) is an interesting attempt to combinate economical, sociological and journalistic perspectives in order to get a grip of the big picture.

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We still don't know whether chain policy is the independent variable, as opposed to the more simplistic notion of merely being a chain is the driving force. Research on concentration needs to handle this problem in order to get along with the forces outside the ivory tower.

Note

1. Quoted in *Underwood* (1993:114).

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