

# **What Was the Task of the Media After All?**

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**T**his eternal question has been answered in a number of ways and in fact it is a set piece among scholars as well as practitioners when reflecting on the media. However, the answers are seldom elaborated in a systematic way; they typically do not progress beyond slogans and lack analytical depth. Yet it is a challenging question both politically and intellectually, leading us to not just to routine issues of media policy but to the bare bones of media theory.

**Answer One** to the question posed by the title is simply: **to make money.**

To appreciate this aspect, let us recall the top five media corporations in the world (after the merger of AOL and Time Warner, the news of which was released on the eve of this conference). The following list can be traced for example in the website resource of the Media Channel (<http://www.mediachannel.org/ownership/>), the figures indicating revenues in billions of US dollars:

- |                     |    |
|---------------------|----|
| 1. AOL Time Warner  | 32 |
| 2. Disney           | 23 |
| 3. Bertelsmann      | 16 |
| 4. News Corporation | 14 |
| 5. Viacom           | 13 |

For comparison, here is Finland's list using the same measures:

- |               |     |
|---------------|-----|
| 1. SanomaWSOY | 1.2 |
| 2. Alma Media | 0.5 |
| 3. Yleisradio | 0.3 |

In Finland, the combined revenue of the three largest media corporations is 2 billion US dollars. This is 6 % of the 32 billions of AOL Time Warner alone. On the other hand, 6 % is not insignificant – as in the case of Finland's Swedish-speaking minority (whose share of the population is 6 %).

Contrary to the popular impression fuelled by typical talk about media moguls Rupert Murdoch & Co, the media giants do not occupy high positions in the global lists of biggest corporations; media corporations can rather be classified as fairly small, as shown by Robert Picard of the Turku School of Economics and Business Administration (Picard 1998).

Nevertheless, media concentration is a serious problem and it leads us to wonder whether under such conditions it is only the few who may speak and the many who are obliged to listen to the same master's voice. This prompts the question what is the degree of pluralism in a concentrated media field, calling for media diversity. Here we do not only look at ownership but also examine the diversity of content which is made available by the more or less the concentrated production machinery. We are compelled to concede that separate ownership of two or more media does not necessarily produce different kinds of content but that the crux of the matter are the rules of the game which determine the operation of the media field – above all the laws of the market. In other words, our perspective has shifted from surface radicalism – chasing the media moguls Murdoch, Erkkö & Co – to the fundamentals of capitalism, following the paths of Karl Marx & Co (Nordenstreng 2000).

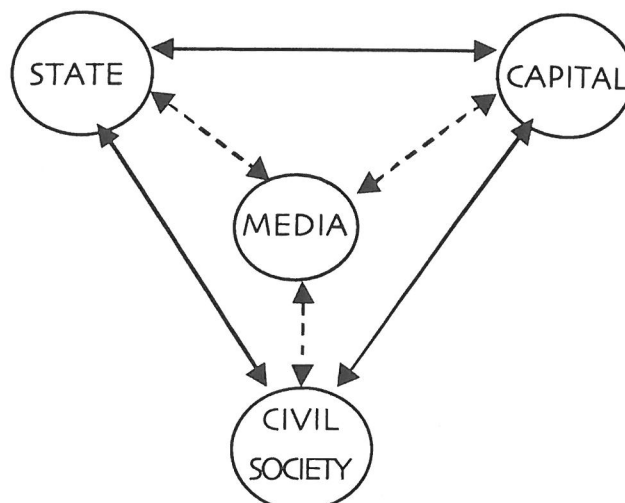
**Answer Two** – a real one after the above warming up – reads: **to support democracy.**

This answer is highlighted by the various roles which the media are supposed to play in democracy. A customary list, officially ratified in Sweden and most of Scandinavia, is the following, whereby the tasks of the media are:

1. to inform the citizens – to be a *communicator*
2. to control those in power – to be a *critic*
3. to maintain a diversity of opinion – to provide a *forum* for debate

These all require, indeed presuppose, independence – just like a judiciary. This is referred to by the concept “fourth estate” – media as the fourth branch of government alongside the legislative (parliament), executive and judicial branches (Nordenstreng, 1997).

The overall situation is highlighted by “Galtung’s triangle” by the Norwegian born pioneer of peace research, whereby society stands on three pillars (Galtung, 1999):



The place of the media is somewhere between the three pillars, depending on the historical situation. Still, the desired place for the media is to be away from both the state and the capital – in the service of the civil society, the media moving “from the audience to the arena” (as I entitled the concluding chapter of a Finnish book on freedom of speech in 1996). In reality, media tend to slide towards the political and market forces – also the media run by professional journalists. Professional doctrines tend to indoctrinate media people to think and act in accordance with the interests of the power holders – even while the media poses as a watchdog of power – and therefore it is typical that whenever the tasks of media in democracy are discussed, practice does not match up to theory. Both sleazy practice and sacred theory should be critically examined and one should not stop giving the media folk a hard time.

The ways of speaking about the tasks of media in society are deeply rooted in our thinking about communication. The paradigms of communication can be crystallized into two models, which more or less follow John Fiske’s (1990) distinction between processual and semiotic schools as well as James Carey’s (1989) distinction between transmission and ritual models:

#### TRANSMISSION

Knowledge  
Linear  
Information & PR

(Walter Lippmann)

#### SHARING

Meaning  
Dialogue  
Conversation

(John Dewey)

The distinction between the transmission paradigm and the sharing paradigm is based on the classics of the 1920s. Here, as in Jaakko Lehtonen’s opening, we are inspired by ideas coming from the dawn of the last century, and the lesson for us living in the middle of Information Society hype is that much of the fashionable concepts such as interactivity can be found in old teachings.

Actually the forefront of communication research has by now passed the stage when it was to be consider oldfashioned to stress knowledge in an enlightenment sense, instead of stressing interaction-based communitarianism. And it is no longer so self-evident that conversation is the solution to democracy – information and consciousness continue to be seen as indispensable for the process of communication. Even the “informational broadcasting policy” may have its renaissance (cf. Nordenstreng, 1994).

On the other hand, we scholars of the older generation have to admit that theories have also changed and there is no longer room for such a purity which we used to represent. Now it is important to be open and tolerant to different approaches, which does not mean such postmodernism that “anything goes”. We are currently living rather



**Picard, R.** 1998. 'Delusions of grandeur: The real problems of concentration in media.' In R. Picard (ed.), *Evolving Media Markets: Effects of Economic and Policy Changes*. Turku: Turku School of Economics and Business Administration (pp. 25-43).

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