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WHAT CONSERVATIVE MEDIA? THE UNPROVEN
CASE FOR CONSERVATIVE MEDIA BIAS

*ABSTRACT: A great deal of recent academic writing claims—but, more often, assumes—that the American news media have a predominantly conservative bias, slanting and shaping their coverage in ways that favor right-wing foreign, economic, cultural, and social policies. Two major books pioneered this position and have gone largely uncriticized, despite their immense influence. A detailed examination of Herbert Gans’s *Deciding What’s News* and Ben Bagdikian’s *The Media Monopoly* shows, however, that they fall far short of proving their claims about media bias. The logic of many of their arguments is highly problematic, but especially glaring is the almost complete lack of solid evidence in either book as to the purportedly conservative nature of media content.*

If you ask a random sample of ordinary Americans about the subject of media bias, a plurality (though generally not a majority) will say that the media tend to be biased in a liberal direction.¹ But among those political scientists, sociologists, and communications scholars who have addressed this issue, a very different view apparently prevails. I say “apparently” because, so far as I can determine, no one has ever conducted a formal survey of social scientists who study the media, inquiring into their views about media bias. But as the notes and citations below suggest, there is a great deal of academic work asserting that the media are

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biased in a conservative direction; substantially fewer scholars appear to believe that media biases work to liberals' advantage.

This paper is part of a larger attempt to examine the issue of media bias, and is perhaps best characterized as an intensive literature review of some of the earliest and most important of the modern scholarship. Rather than developing a new method or new data for testing the media-bias question, I am interested in assessing the work that has already been published on this topic. To that end, I will examine two influential old standards—classic demonstrations, it is thought, of the conservative-media-bias thesis: Herbert Gans's *Deciding What's News* and Ben Bagdikian's *The Media Monopoly*. The question I pose about these books is simple: Do they prove their point? Do they actually provide convincing evidence of conservative media bias?

My answer to both questions is negative: their assertions notwithstanding, neither book provides solid data or even a clear theoretical reason to believe that the American media have a right-wing bias. (Preliminary analysis of influential books in the genre by Todd Gitlin [1980], Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky [1988], Michael Parenti [1993], and Eric Alterman [2003] suggests that the same conclusion applies to them.)

Conservative Media Values?

When I queried a small sample of political scientists about which books had been most successful in convincing them that the news media have a conservative bias, the single most often-cited work was Herbert Gans's *Deciding What's News* (1980).² Gans's book is a multilayered study of how stories are selected and, to a lesser extent, produced at two major television networks (CBS and NBC) and two national magazines (*Newsweek* and *Time*). Its greatest effect on the debate about media bias may, however, have been its discussion, in chapter 2, of the "enduring values" in the news.³

Gans claims that eight major clusters of values play a major role in determining what gets reported and how: ethnocentrism, altruistic democracy, responsible capitalism, small-town pastoralism, individualism, moderatism, social order, and national leadership. These values, as Gans argues at the end of the chapter, are by no means uniformly conservative. "Responsible capitalism," for example, includes acknowledging "the necessity for the welfare state" (Gans 1980, 47). Small-town

pastoralism means, among other things, that the media have a pro-environmental bias.

The news dealt with the conflict between the preservation of nature and the activities of developers long before the environment and ecology became political issues; and more often than not, the news took at least an implicit stand against the developers. The post-war developers of suburbia were seen as despoiling the land in their rapacious search for profits; that they were concurrently providing houses for people was rarely noted. (*Ibid.*, 49.)

Yet other “enduring values” clearly have more conservative implications. The news as reported in major American media, Gans argues, tends to:

- “value its own nation above all” and “judge other countries by the extent to which they live up to or imitate American practices and values” (*ibid.*, 42);
- treat business, in a variety of ways, more favorably than government (*ibid.*, 46–47);
- be “consistently critical of Communist and democratic-socialist economies” (*ibid.*, 47);
- keep close scrutiny on “welfare cheaters” and the “welfare mess” while largely overlooking similar waste in the Defense Department (*ibid.*, 47);
- have “an underlying respect for tradition of any kind, save perhaps discrimination against racial, sexual, and other minorities” (*ibid.*, 50);
- celebrate “rugged individualists” and “self-made men and women” (*ibid.*, 50–51);
- endorse moderation, and show suspicion of “political ideologists” of both the right and the left (*ibid.*, 51–52); and
- take a critical view of any person or group that threatens to cause “social disorder” (*ibid.*, 52–62).

The American media, writes Gans (1980, 68) in summary, are best described as “reformist”: they support those who want the country to live up to its professed ideals, but they have no interest in challenging those ideals or making any other fundamental criticisms of the economy or polity.

On closer inspection, however, most of the enduring values are defined in a sufficiently elastic way that it is often difficult to say what would qualify as a counterexample. Take “responsible capitalism.” “The

underlying posture of the news toward the economy,” Gans (1980, 46) initially declares, rests on “an optimistic faith that . . . businessmen and women will compete with each other in order to create prosperity for all.” Yet, as Gans develops this idea over the next two pages, it quickly becomes clear that “responsible capitalism,” at least as it is envisioned by the media, is nothing like the classical liberalism of Milton Friedman or, even less, the libertarian credo of Ayn Rand. Business must, according to media coverage, “refrain from unreasonable profits and gross exploitation of workers or customers”; bigness is a vice and monopoly is “clearly evil”; “unions and consumer organizations are accepted”—though strikes are “frequently judged negatively”; economic growth is a positive phenomenon—unless it brings about inflation or pollution; the welfare state is necessary (*ibid.*, 46–47). It is not clear what kind of story would *not* fit within the responsible-capitalist rubric, except one that explicitly endorsed socialism or one that argued, à la Friedman, that businesses exist to make as much money as they can, and have no other responsibilities to serve the public interest. A relentless succession of stories about corporate corruption and misbehavior could be fit under the all-inclusive rubric of “responsible capitalism.”

Labeling issues aside, the biggest problem with Gans’s “enduring values” is that he offers little empirical evidence to prove that they really are an important characteristic of news coverage. The enduring values are, in the end, nothing more than one sociologist’s opinion about which values he thinks undergird the news. As Gans (1980, 41) says just before presenting his list, “The methods by which I identified the values were impressionistic; the values really emerged from continual scrutiny of the news over a long time.” He did not, he notes, undertake any kind of “quantitative analysis.” Nor does he produce much anecdotal evidence. His discussion of the media’s respect for individualism, for example, includes a number of broad generalizations about how the media value “freedom of the individual against the encroachments of nation and society.” But he mentions only two specific stories: a passing reference to Charles Kuralt’s “On the Road” series on CBS; and an article written by a *Newsweek* reporter in which she expressed her preference for “New York’s chaos” over the “ennui” of California (*ibid.*, 50–51).

For all its influence on other media scholars, Gans’s discussion of the enduring values occupies only about 25 pages in a 335-page book. Most of the book (chapters 3–9) is a detailed analysis of how the news is put together at four major national news organizations, an analysis that is

based largely on a substantial amount of “participant-observation” field-work that Gans carried out (intermittently) between 1965 and 1975. This central part of the book includes a great deal of additional discussion about the role of values in story selection—but in the end, nothing in these chapters comes close to demonstrating that the media have a right-wing bias.

To begin with, Gans provides no systematic data on the political values, beliefs, or assumptions of the journalists he studied. Gans spent a substantial amount of time hanging around the newsrooms of CBS, NBC, *Time*, and *Newsweek*, watching how the journalists did their work and talking to them when the work-pace permitted. But he did not conduct structured interviews, and his conclusions about the journalists’ ideologies are therefore, again, “impressionistic” (1980, 211). And Gans provides a number of reasons for wondering how well-supported his impressions are. For a variety of reasons, the journalists he studied apparently didn’t spend a lot of time talking about their own political opinions. To do so would have undermined the carefully nurtured claim of objectivity and, thus, their own “journalistic credibility” (*ibid.*, 186). The national news magazines and television networks, Gans says at another point, “seem to attract people who keep their values to themselves” (*ibid.*, 184).

Moreover, such information as Gans was able to gather hardly bears out a portrait of media personnel who are traditionalist, conservative, or pro-capitalist. “Journalists,” he writes, “generally describe themselves as liberals,” though, he immediately adds, “liberalism is a synonym for being independent, open-minded, or both” (1980, 211). Yet, he concedes one page later, “on ‘social’ issues”—“ecology, consumerism, marijuana use, and abortion”—“many of the journalists were clearly liberal” in the political sense of the term (*ibid.*, 212).

Are Liberal Journalists Merely Open-Minded?

At just about the time Gans was researching and writing his book, a number of rigorous empirical studies of media attitudes and opinions were being carried out, and they paint a portrait that partly corroborates but also substantially challenges Gans’s conclusions. In 1971, John Johnstone, Edward Slawski, and William Bowman conducted a national survey of American journalists that included a smaller sub-sample of respondents who worked for “nationally prominent” news organiza-

tions such as the ones Gans studied. Of the “rank-and-file” journalists at these organizations, 12 percent described themselves as “pretty far to the left,” 40 percent as “a little to the left,” 30 percent as “middle of the road,” and just 17 percent as “a little to the right” or “pretty far to the right.” Liberals outnumbered conservatives, in short, by a 3-to-1 margin. And contrary to what Gans (1980, 212) asserts, the news executives at these nationally prominent media were even further to the left: 63 percent of executives said they were a little or pretty far to the left, versus just 10 percent who said they were a little or pretty far to the right (Johnstone et al. 1976, 226).

Gans (1980, 211) claims that his own “impressionistic data support the findings” of the Johnstone study. For to Gans, as we have seen, the journalists’ self-described liberalism is just a synonym for being “independent” or “open-minded.” But again, Gans has, so far as I can determine, very little hard data supporting the claim that that is *all* that their self-assessed “liberalism” means to journalists. On the contrary. In 1979 and 1980, S. Robert Lichter, Stanley Rothman, and Linda S. Lichter conducted hour-long interviews with 238 journalists who worked for “America’s most influential media outlets”—including *Time*, *Newsweek*, and all three television networks. Their data about the same group about which Gans writes show that their liberalism was also manifest in attitudes about many specific policy issues. Ninety percent of the elite journalists sampled were pro-choice on abortion, 80 percent supported affirmative action, and 50 percent said that “the main goal of U.S. foreign policy has been to protect U.S. business interests.” On economic issues, media elites were, as Gans’s “responsible-capitalism” label implies, hardly socialists. But the journalists did endorse a number of positions prominent in liberal criticism of free markets: 68 percent, for example, felt that “government should work to reduce substantially the income gap between the rich and the poor.” Finally, in every presidential election between 1964 and 1976, at least 80 percent of the journalists said they had voted for the Democratic candidate (Lichter, Rothman, and Lichter 1986, 29–30). There is, I think, no obvious way to square these data with the claim that media liberalism is simply a matter of being independent and open-minded—even if that is how liberal journalists define their own liberalism.

If journalists are indeed *political* liberals, Gans provides a very compelling case for concluding that their beliefs and values are very likely to affect their reporting—despite journalists’ protestations that they leave their politics at the office door. Values, Gans (1980, 182, 190, 199)

argues at a number of points, do enter into news judgments, primarily in unconscious ways. Values also affect what Gans (1980, 201) calls “reality judgments”: the untested assumptions that journalists make (and report) about external reality. This subtle form of bias is borne out in Lichter et al.’s (1986, 63–71) study of what journalists remembered when asked to summarize fictional news reports. Facts that were consistent with liberal ideology generally got noticed by the journalists; facts that were not tended to be ignored.

For a variety of reasons, moreover, there seem to be few effective checks on journalists’ biases. Journalists, according to Gans (1980, 230), have “little knowledge about the actual audience” and largely “rejected feedback from it.” They don’t pay much attention to audience mail and tend to dismiss critical letters as coming from “nuts” and “cranks” (ibid., 231). They also pay little attention to formal audience research. The informal feedback of which they do make some use tends to come from “family members, friends, neighbors, and people journalists meet at parties” (ibid., 235–36)—people whom, one suspects, also share the journalists’ basic values and beliefs.

Reliance on Official Sources

There is one other argument in *Deciding What’s News* that is frequently made to buttress the claim that the media have a conservative bias.⁴ The argument has two major steps. First, most media stories are based on the statements and actions of leading elected and governmental officials: the president, members of Congress, cabinet officers, and top officials at the state and local level. Second, because reporters get most of their stories from these “official sources,” they are subservient to these sources. Reporters “must concentrate on stories that please their sources, since angering them may endanger their closeness or rapport, thus ending the reporter’s usefulness on the beat” (Gans 1980, 133). Hence, they tend to produce stories that accept government pronouncements at face value and show top officials in a positive light.

At one level, there is little doubt about the descriptive accuracy of this argument’s first step: as Gans shows in chapter 1, and as numerous other studies have also documented, leading public officials, particularly the president, get far more coverage than other would-be newsmakers.⁵ There is, however, an enormous difference between saying that news derives from official sources and saying that news derives from conserv-

ative sources. In actuality, the public officials who supply most of the news are, in ideological terms, a highly variegated group, including liberals as well as conservatives, Democrats as well as Republicans—regardless of which party is in power. Ronald Reagan, Jesse Helms, and George W. Bush are or were oft-quoted public officials, but so are Ted Kennedy, John Kerry, and Bill and Hilary Clinton. If the modern media's obsession with the presidency helped Reagan advance his conservative policies (and the evidence that it actually did so is quite mixed; see Mayer 1992), it also helped Bill Clinton promote his more left-of-center agenda. A focus on those who already hold major positions of governmental power does, it is true, inhibit coverage of more extreme opinions, but this effect, too, applies to both ends of the ideological spectrum: socialism and radical feminism don't get much attention in the news, but neither do libertarianism or Christian fundamentalism.

The second step in Gans's argument about official sources is equally problematic. More than Gans and other media critics recognize, the reporter-source relationship is a two-way street. Sources have control over certain kinds of information that reporters need, but reporters also control resources that sources plainly value. In particular, the White House correspondents are the gatekeepers who regulate the president's access to the larger American public. Though presidents sometimes speak about trying to go "over the heads of the media" by taking their case "directly to the people," their capacity to do this is actually quite limited. Most of what the public learns about the president will be based on media coverage. The media do pay attention to official sources in general and the presidency in particular, but this doesn't mean that officials or the president decide the slant of media coverage.

The presidency, it is worth adding, is not a single, unified actor. Whatever the president and/or his press secretary may say about a particular issue, there may be high government officials who will, on or off the record, tell a somewhat different story. If the Defense Department claims that fighting is going well in a particular foreign conflict, the State Department and even some officials within Defense may express a contrary view. Congress, of course, speaks with an even more fragmented voice. Thus, if the president refuses to cooperate with, say, the White House correspondent of the *New York Times*, this doesn't mean that the *Times* will not carry a story from the White House. More likely, it means that a story will be written that simply doesn't include the president's own message and perspective.

Who finally has the dominant position in the reporter-source relationship? In my view, there is no way to settle this question on a theoretical or abstract level. Both sides have important resources but also substantial needs. To borrow some terminology from negotiation analysis, these needs and resources probably define a broad “zone of agreement.”⁶ The final “contract” that is, in effect, negotiated between “the media” and “the president” will vary from day to day and from one administration to the next. The proper way to settle the question, therefore, is to look at the actual content of media news reports. And as any one of the last eight presidents would surely testify, obsessive coverage of the president doesn’t necessarily mean favorable coverage. The White House bureaus that every major news organization diligently maintains produce a great number of very negative stories.⁷ People like Andrea Mitchell, Leslie Stahl, David Gregory, and Dana Milbank don’t just report whatever the president says each day, without comment or criticism, still less with the positive “spin” that the president’s press secretary puts on it. They also run stories about how the president’s economic policies aren’t working, how his foreign policy is in disarray, or about the latest scandals surrounding him, the vice president, or the president’s appointees.

In the end, then, Gans does not come close to demonstrating that the major American news media have a conservative bias. His analysis probably does go some way toward showing that the media are not *radical*, particularly on economic issues. Unfortunately, Gans sometimes seems to view the world through the lenses of the New Left. It is as if everyone, including journalists, can be divided into two groups: radicals and the Establishment (a word that Gans actually uses, suitably capitalized, at several points; e.g., Gans 1980, xiv). The Establishment is invariably unified, change-resistant, and conservative. Hence, if the media aren’t radical, they must be conservative. There are some senses in which one can meaningfully label Al Gore or John Kerry conservative: they don’t, for example, advocate violent revolution. But such labeling distorts what most contemporary observers mean when they complain about “liberal media bias.”

The Media Are Corporate Owned. So What?

The first edition of Ben Bagdikian’s *The Media Monopoly* was published in 1983.⁸ It is some measure of its influence that it is favorably cited by

almost every subsequent book that argues that the media have a conservative bias.⁹

The most famous single argument in this book concerns the growing concentration of ownership in the mass media. Bagdikian looked at five major types of media: newspapers, magazines, television, book publishing, and movies. He asked: How many corporations control half of the total market share of each type of media? In television, for example, just three firms—ABC, NBC, and CBS—accounted for a substantial majority of all programs viewed in 1983 (although this percentage has declined substantially since then). Similarly, twenty companies accounted for more than half of the daily papers purchased in the United States. In 1983, Bagdikian concluded, 46 corporations controlled more than half of the business in the five types of media put together. By 1990, just 23 corporations controlled half the business in these five media.¹⁰

Media-concentration data aside, *The Media Monopoly* is a compendium of arguments about the effects of money on media. At one point or another, Bagdikian argues that:

1. Large media firms provide news and entertainment that is highly sympathetic toward corporations in general and toward pro-corporate public policies.
2. Large media firms run stories that promote their own corporate interests, and kill or downplay stories that are unfavorable to the firm.
3. Corporations run a considerable amount of advertising that is designed to improve their own image and/or the image of business generally, rather than to sell products.
4. When an independent newspaper is purchased by a chain, the quality and quantity of its news coverage is likely to decline.
5. Large media corporations often seek special favors from government and, because of their perceived influence on public opinion, frequently get them.
6. Media corporations cater not to all consumers, but only to those demographic groups coveted by advertisers.
7. Mass advertising has been primarily responsible for the increasing prevalence of monopoly newspapers.
8. Competitive newspapers are journalistically superior to monopoly newspapers.
9. A remarkably large proportion of the typical newspaper—and

thus of the raw materials that make up the newspaper—consists of advertising.

10. Mass advertising inflates the prices of the products advertised.
11. Some articles and programs are killed because they offend the interests of major advertisers, while other articles and programs are run just because they are pleasing to potential sponsors.
12. In the pursuit of profits, the television networks put on programs that have too much sex and violence.
13. Newspapers' pursuit of short-term profits has actually resulted in a long-term decline in newspaper readership.

The first point worth noting about this list is that many of the arguments Bagdikian makes are ones with which conservatives could easily agree, since they have no obvious implications for the issue of media bias. No major conservative writer on media of whom I am aware has ever written a defense of chain newspapers, nor would a conservative have any special reason to deny the possibility that advertisers value some viewers and readers more than others, or that this preference gets translated into advertising rates and program choices. Conservative pro-family groups have been at least as vigorous as those on the left in arguing for less sex and violence on television. And some of the most stinging denunciations of monopoly newspapers today come from conservatives who live in cities like Los Angeles and Minneapolis, in which the only daily newspaper has, they believe, a very severe liberal bias.¹¹

Bagdikian's Dubious Evidence

I will focus on the few arguments Bagdikian presents that do have implications for the conservative-bias issue—particularly point 1 on the list. Bagdikian's book is filled with sweeping declarations about how favorable the media are toward business. For example:

No sacred cow has been so protected and has left more generous residues in the news than the American corporation. . . . Since World War I hardly a mainstream American news medium has failed to grant its most favored treatment to corporate life. . . . There have also been ugliness and injustice [reported] in corporate wielding of power. . . .

But through it all, most of the mass media depicted corporate life as benevolent and patriotic. (Bagdikian 2000, 47–48.)

Does Bagdikian make his case? Do the American media have a pro-corporate bias?

Like Gans, Bagdikian provides no rigorous or systematic evidence to back up his charges. In a 252-page book (not including end notes), he cites not a single content study showing that media stories about business or corporations are actually favorable. His evidence is, instead, entirely anecdotal—and most of the anecdotes are not about stories that *were* run, but about stories that were *not*: books and articles about corporate wrongdoing that were killed, or at least were not given as much attention as Bagdikian feels they deserved. The number of such incidents cited in Bagdikian’s book is not particularly large, with an exception to be noted later; nevertheless, they provide almost all the evidence Bagdikian produces to support his conclusion that the media are highly protective of corporate interests.

The plain problem with this method is that it is most unclear what sorts of general conclusions can be drawn from anecdotal evidence. Granting that some books and stories have been killed because they affected powerful economic interests, is this something that occurs regularly or rarely? And what, if anything, do these cases tell us about the stories on business and corporate behavior that *do* get reported? For every anti-corporate story that is suppressed, a business defender might argue, there are dozens more that do get published or broadcast. “Haliburton,” “Enron,” and “Wal-Mart” did not become one-word epithets due to lack of media coverage.

At times, Bagdikian’s unwillingness to evaluate his anecdotal material against the larger totality of what is printed or broadcast seems almost painfully obvious. In chapter 2 of his book, for example, he relates a story about how in 1973, Warner Modular Publications killed a book called *Counter-Revolutionary Violence*, co-authored by Noam Chomsky, the thesis of which was that “the United States, in attempting to suppress revolutionary movements in underdeveloped countries, had become the leading source of violence against native people” (Bagdikian 2000, 33). Just as the book was about to be published, Bagdikian says, it was suddenly cancelled on the grounds that it would “embarrass the parent firm.” The books that had been printed were destroyed, and all references to it in the publishing house’s catalogue were deleted.

Assuming that this story is true (Warner Communications denies it),

it surely reflects very poorly on both Warner and William Sarnoff, the Warner executive most responsible for the decision. But does Bagdikian really believe that Noam Chomsky is having trouble getting his work published? According to the Harvard University library catalogue (which I consult because it is likely to be nearly exhaustive), Chomsky published 49 books on various political topics between 1973 and 2003, with twenty different publishing houses.¹² Whatever Warner Communications may have decided to do, other firms were there to fill the gap. Chomsky's work is most definitely getting published.

Bagdikian's anecdotal method can be undercut in a second way. For every instance he can cite of an anti-corporate story that wasn't published, one can find an anecdote that cuts in the opposite direction: an anti-corporate story that was published or broadcast even though it probably shouldn't have been, because it was based on insubstantial or trumped-up evidence. Consider two examples that are favorites among critics of liberal media bias:

1. On November 17, 1992, "Dateline NBC," a prime-time news-magazine program, ran a story called "Waiting to Explode?," which claimed that certain kinds of General Motors trucks were unsafe because their gas tanks were mounted outside the vehicles' frames. The visual highlight of the story was a crash test in which a car slammed into the side of a truck and the truck immediately burst into flames.

There was only one problem: the test was rigged. As NBC admitted on a later "Dateline" program in February, 1993, the consultants who performed the test had put "incendiary devices under the trucks to insure that there would be a fire if gasoline were released from the truck's tank." And to insure that gasoline was released, the gas tank was filled beyond capacity, and the original gas cap was replaced by an "ill-fitting" cap salvaged from another truck. None of this was, of course, was mentioned in the original report.¹³

2. In late 1978, "60 Minutes" asked to interview executives from the Illinois Power Company (IP), in connection with a nuclear power plant the company was building in central Illinois. IP agreed, with the stipulation that, every time "60 Minutes" was filming on company property, IP could film the same scenes and interviews. In November 1979, "60 Minutes" broadcast a typically hard-hitting story on IP, claiming that the plant's construction was being delayed and costs increased because of gross mismanagement on the company's part. IP, however, issued its own "response video," which showed the entire "60 Minutes" story, but periodically interrupted it to provide additional information, most of

which “60 Minutes” had been told about but left out, and interview material that was edited out of the broadcast.

The IP “response video” is a devastating critique of the “60 Minutes” report. The person identified in the story as IP’s “sharpest critic” had serious credibility problems: he had plainly falsified a substantial number of items on his résumé and had uncertain expertise in the area of nuclear power. “60 Minutes” knew about these problems, but never mentioned them. Many other assertions about IP made in the story were either unsupported or technically true but highly misleading. And “60 Minutes” completely misinterpreted a major planning document examined in the story, in a way that made the company’s construction schedule look ridiculously optimistic. As one commentator noted:

In virtually every case, the Illinois Power film shows “60 Minutes” omitting portions of interviews that offer evidence challenging its contentions against the power company. Certainly, Illinois Power tries to put its best face on things. But “60 Minutes” follows a pattern of believing the worst and artfully neutralizing elements that might disturb that pattern.¹⁴

If the “corporate media” are even half so protective of corporate interests as Bagdikian claims, it is difficult to explain how incidents like these could occur. Far from looking for reasons to kill them, NBC and CBS ran stories that were far more critical of the corporations in question than a fair reading of the evidence would have justified. So why should we take Bagdikian’s handful of anecdotes as representative?

A final problem with Bagdikian’s anecdotes is their accuracy. In a fair number of cases, he leaves out important information or overstates the evidence provided by the sources he cites. For example, Bagdikian (2000, 39) offers the following instance of corporate influence over the media:

The quick empathy that power centers have for each other seemed to be demonstrated when Kermit Roosevelt, a former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) officer, wrote a book called *Countercoup: The Struggle for the Control of Iran*. It was the author’s inside version of how intelligence agencies overthrew a left-leaning Iranian premier, Mohammed Mossadegh, in 1953 and reinstated the Shah. The issue was control of oil. The plot was called “Ajax,” of which Roosevelt wrote: “The original proposal for Ajax came from the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) after its expulsion from Iran nine months earlier.” The book was pub-

lished by McGraw-Hill in early 1979. Books were on sale in bookstores and reviewer copies were already in the mails when British Petroleum, successor corporation to AIOC, persuaded McGraw-Hill to recall all the books—from the stores and from reviewers.

But the source Bagdikian cites for this anecdote, a 1979 article in the *Wall Street Journal*, tells a story that is importantly different. In the original manuscript, according to the *Journal*, Roosevelt claimed that the CIA engineered the 1953 coup by working with a British intelligence unit called MI6 “that doesn’t even like to acknowledge its existence, let alone its role in planning Mideast coups.” As a former CIA operative, Roosevelt had to submit his manuscript to the CIA for prepublication review; when he did so, the CIA “insisted that any direct references to British intelligence would have to go.” So Roosevelt changed the offending passages “so that they referred instead to Anglo-Iranian Oil Co” instead of British intelligence. British Petroleum understandably objected to this change, since it was now being blamed for a coup in whose planning or execution it had no role. When the issue was raised with McGraw-Hill, the publisher decided, to its credit, that the “mis-statements” were significant enough to require correction (McGraw-Hill was also threatened with a libel suit), and thus it recalled the copies that had already been printed (Ignatius 1979; Dong 1979). The revised version was published in early 1980—another point Bagdikian neglects to mention—with all references to the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company changed to “British intelligence.”¹⁵ Even the reviewer for the *Nation* said that the role of British intelligence in the revised edition is “correctly ascribed” (Powers 1980, 437).

Similarly, Bagdikian (2000, 167, ellipses in original) quotes a senior vice-president of MGM as telling a group of newspaper executives that \$500 million worth of movie ads

cannot be taken for granted and you’ve got to get this word to your editorial counterparts. . . . Today the daily newspaper does not always create a climate that is supportive and favorable to the motion picture industry. . . . Gratuitous and hateful reviews threaten to cause the romance between newspapers and the motion picture industry to wither on the vine.

Once again, however, the article Bagdikian cites paints a somewhat different picture of what this MGM executive, Richard Kahn, actually said. He did complain about the way newspapers treated the motion-

picture industry, but negative reviews were actually far down his list of complaints. The full sentence from his speech, as quoted in the source of which Bagdikian relies, reads:

Such things as wall-to-wall amusement sections with little or no editorial coverage, elimination of movie logs, chaotic and discriminatory rate structures, bad reproduction, inconsistency of column widths, unreasonably long deadlines and unqualified reviewers and *gratuitous and hateful reviews threaten to cause the “romance” between newspapers and the motion picture industry to “wither on the vine.”* (Gloede 1981, emphasis added.)

In later portions of the speech, Kahn urged the newspaper executives to revise their rate structures, give as much news coverage to movies as they do to television, “improve the quality of your reproduction [and] page layout,” and continue to provide “free movie time clock log[s].” Kahn also complained about “misanthropic headline writers” who turned “a negative review” into a “poisonous polemic,” but that criticism seems much milder, and like a less heavy-handed attempt to intrude into newspaper editorial functions, when placed in the full context of the speech.

Are the Corporate Media Pro-Business?

It is precisely because anecdotes can be found to substantiate almost any view of the media that communication scholars in almost all social-science disciplines agree that the best way to study media content is by using content analysis, which aspires to measure communication content in ways that are relatively objective and generalizable. Content analyses of business-news coverage have almost invariably found that business gets considerably more negative than positive coverage. Ted J. Smith III, for example, examined the major themes in network news coverage of business and industry during three one-year periods in the 1980s. In all three periods studied, critical coverage overwhelmed positive coverage by a ratio of 11:1 or greater. As Smith (1988, 66) notes, in 1984–85 and 1986–87,

almost one out of every five economic stories—and perhaps 5–7 percent of *all* television news stories—included an explicit attack on a business or businessman. . . . Businessmen were more often portrayed as criminals on network television news than as benefactors of any kind.

Similarly, Lichter, Rothman, and Lichter (1986, 270–92) showed that the oil industry received a great deal of highly negative coverage during the 1970s. The *New York Times*, *Time* magazine, and the national television networks portrayed oil companies as monopolistic, as having manipulated supplies in order to increase their own profits, and as primarily responsible for the decade's major energy shortages.

In short, business received a great deal of critical coverage in the American media, and comparatively little positive coverage, contrary to Bagdikian's assertion.

Bagdikian's argument that the major American media are pro-corporate extends to entertainment programming, not just news. In order to provide a favorable atmosphere for corporate money-making and to attract advertisers, television in particular is supposedly replete with programs that are designed to sell the "corporate ideology" (Bagdikian 2000, 155–61). But here, too, serious content studies provide a very different picture.

The most comprehensive study of the social and political content of entertainment television is another product of the indefatigable Lichter, Lichter, and Rothman, who analyzed 620 randomly selected programs (31 per year) broadcast between 1955 and 1986, roughly contemporaneous with the period Bagdikian studied. One of their most striking conclusions was about how negatively business and business people were portrayed on television. "Across the entire three decades of our study," Lichter et al. (1994, 210–11) found, "business characters were consistently depicted more negatively than those in other occupations." Forty-five percent of all the businessmen on TV were coded as playing negative roles, versus 37 percent who were portrayed positively (the rest were neutral). By contrast, all other characters whose occupations were identifiable (lawyers, doctors, blue-collar workers, etc.) were depicted positively by a two-to-one margin (46 percent positive, 23 percent negative). "The proportion of bad guy businessmen," in short, "is almost double that of all other occupations."

Moreover, businesspeople depicted on television were

over three times more likely to be criminals than are members of other occupations. One in seven business characters commits a crime, compared to one in twenty-three characters in all occupations. . . . Even this underestimates the venality of TV's businessmen, since their crimes tend to be either violent or sleazy. They commit 40 percent of the murders

and 44 percent of vice crimes like drug trafficking and pimping. (Ibid., 211.)

The institution of business was also treated badly. The theme of “corruption versus honesty” in business was raised in 68 different programs; 81 percent of them found honesty to be lacking in business. Twenty-one programs dealt with the “relationship of business to government.” In all but one case, the theme was that “business wields excessive power over the public arena in order to obtain preferential treatment” (Lichter, Lichter, and Rothman 1994, 229, 232).

Another study, conducted by the Media Institute, analyzed 200 entertainment programs (4 episodes from each of 50 programs) that aired in 1979 and 1980. Of 118 business characters in these programs, 67 percent were portrayed negatively, while just 25 percent were shown in a positive light. Moreover, the study found, “American business is slapped with an even worse image than are individual businessmen” (Theberge 1981, 29). When business characters were shown acting positively, the positive acts almost never arose from their business activities. In one program, a businessman had adopted two orphaned black children, but the focus of this series was on the businessman’s home life; his business received only passing mention. By contrast, when characters were actually shown performing business activities, 86 percent were portrayed negatively; only 7 percent were portrayed positively.

Bagdikian’s argument that news and entertainment programming adopts a pro-corporate stance to attract or retain advertising is no better supported. Again, his evidence is entirely anecdotal—and in this case, most of the anecdotes are rather dated, even when first published in the 1983 edition of his book, let alone when repeated in the subsequent editions. The NBC “Camel News Caravan” would not air film showing a “No Smoking” sign—in the early 1950s (Bagdikian 2000, 156). *Esquire* magazine apologized to piano manufacturers for an article claiming that guitars were better than pianos—in 1941 (ibid., 161). Bagdikian quotes a series of memos and statements in which executives at major corporations discuss the kinds of television programs on which they wish to advertise; all are taken from hearings conducted by the Federal Communications Commission in 1961 (ibid., 156–59). The *New York Times* gave insufficient coverage to the link between cancer and cigarettes—in 1953 and 1954. The president of the Grocery Manufacturers Association claimed that he had been able to persuade a number of major magazines to run “favorable food articles”—in 1962 (ibid., 162).

The Logic of the Corporate Media

It is worth noting, in this connection, that Gans (1980, 253)—who can hardly be accused of being a right-wing or pro-business zealot—was quite insistent that, at least at the news organizations he studied, the news was not altered in response to pressure from advertisers. As he put it:

While [journalists] occasionally suspect their superiors of using commercial considerations, there is never any suspicion that they had surrendered to advertisers. In our discussions about successful advertiser censorship, the journalists could think of only a few, well-publicized cases, many dating back to the 1950s. In any case, top producers and editors would not consider killing a story or story suggestion because it might antagonize advertisers; nor do chilling effects lead to unconscious self-censorship.¹⁶

Gans observed an invisible but very real wall between advertising and news decisions that, arguably, has a business motive behind it, even though it has become enshrined in an ethical code. Journalism makes money for “corporate media conglomerates” by selling advertising, which depends on maintaining a large audience. Members of the audience who suspect that they’re getting pro-advertiser propaganda dressed up as objective journalism will stop viewing or reading. The bottom-line considerations that are paramount to corporate media conglomerates demand the protection of the most valuable commodity possessed by their news operations—their credibility—against commercialist taint. Thus, the logic dictated by the very thing that Bagdikian decries, the profit motive, is inconsistent with his claim that the news media shill for their advertisers.

Another problem with this part of Bagdikian’s analysis is his failure to distinguish between what advertisers say they want and what they actually get. Bagdikian quotes a succession of memos and statements from major advertisers saying they want programs in which a businessman isn’t “cast in the role of a villain” (2000, 157) and that “reinforce our corporate messages” (ibid., 160). But it is by no means obvious that the advertisers were successful in this effort, any more than politicians are successful when they ask for more favorable media treatment. To judge from the Lichter, Lichter, and Rothman data, advertisers were, in fact, strikingly unsuccessful.

Moreover, advertisers can be accommodated in other ways than by changing program content. To quote Gans (1980, 254) again:

[Elite-media producers and editors] know their most regular advertisers but think about them only in cases of possible conflict. If a top producer chooses a story on smoking and lung cancer, he checks whether a cigarette company is listed as one of the day's sponsors; and after first proposing, tongue in cheek, to place the story immediately before or after the cigarette commercial, he informs the business department of the story, which in turn allows the sponsor (or the advertising agency) to postpone the commercial for another day. If the agency decides to run the commercial nevertheless, it will be placed as far away as possible from the cancer story.

This type of accommodation also seems to have occurred in another case cited—and, I believe, misinterpreted—by Bagdikian (2000, 167). “In 1978,” he claims, Air Canada “notified newspaper advertising managers that its ads would be canceled as long as any news story of an Air Canada crash or hijacking ran in the paper and if its ads were carried within two pages of a news story of any crash or hijacking on any airline.” Actually, the article Bagdikian cites says that Air Canada had asked newspapers to “remove the airline’s ads if there is news of an Air Canada accident or hijacking, and to keep the ads out of the paper *until the story is no longer being carried*” (*Editor & Publisher* 1978, emphasis added). In other words, Air Canada was not threatening to withdraw its ads from any paper that covered an Air Canada accident. (Given the contemporary media’s fondness for disaster stories, particularly high-profile tragedies like airplane crashes, did Bagdikian really believe that newspapers would have responded favorably to such an ultimatum?) It merely asked that the ads not be run in the same issue with such stories.

The only charge made by Bagdikian that seems to be reasonably well-supported by the evidence in his book is the second on my list above: namely, that media firms sometimes kill or downplay stories that are unfavorable to the parent company. Here, too, the evidence is anecdotal, but there are enough anecdotes to convince me, at least, that the problem is real, though far from inevitable or universal.¹⁷

It is important to be clear about what this charge amounts to. It may be true, as Bagdikian claims, that the *Los Angeles Times* once provided very sympathetic coverage of proposed California water projects partly because its own real-estate holdings would have become considerably more valuable if those projects were built (2000, 39–40).¹⁸ But this does

not imply that the *Times* took a pro-business stance on other issues, where its own corporate interests were not immediately at stake.

Thus, while Bagdikian provocatively discusses the effects of the profit motive on media *structure*, his most fundamental assertions about media *content* are simply not proven. There is little evidence in *The Media Monopoly* that the mainstream media really do grant their “most favored treatment to corporate life,” and much evidence elsewhere against this claim.

Assumptions vs. Evidence

For reasons of space, this article has featured an analysis of just two books on the topic of media bias, albeit two books that have been highly influential among academic media critics. Both books seem to assume that the conservative bias of the media is so self-evident that it requires little more than a few anecdotes to illustrate a general pattern that “everybody knows” is out there.

In Gans’s case, one can at least say that his book was published at a time when serious studies of the media-bias question were still in their infancy. But the later editions of Bagdikian’s book appeared at a time when a significant number of studies contesting his central thesis were already in print. But Bagdikian never seems to take the opposite point of view very seriously. Conservative criticisms of the media are dismissed as though they were figments of the imaginations of self-interested corporate executives and corporate-funded think tanks.

At a minimum, I hope that this article cautions scholars who, having perhaps read the likes of Gans and Bagdikian too uncritically, or having seen glowing references to them frequently repeated, believe that the media’s right-wing bias has been conclusively established. In these two books (and in the many similar books I have examined to date), the claim that the American media have a conservative bias is unproven, at best.

NOTES

1. For a brief review of the survey evidence, see Mayer 2004. In September 2003, for example, the Gallup Poll asked a national sample, “In general, do you think the news media is too liberal, just about right, or too conservative?” Forty-five percent said too liberal, 14 percent too conservative.

2. Though the book was first published in 1979, all references in this article are based on the 1980 edition.
3. For two good examples of political scientists who endorse Gans's approach, see Page and Shapiro 1992, 376–81; and Iyengar and Kinder 1987, 132.
4. For other presentations of the same argument, see Page and Shapiro 1992, 380; and Hertsgaard 1988, ch. 4.
5. For particularly good data on this point, see Sigal 1973, ch. 6.
6. For a good explanation of the basic concepts used here, see Raiffa 1982, ch. 4.
7. See, for example, Smoller 1990; Robinson, Clancy, and Grand 1983; and Smith 1988.
8. Unless specifically indicated otherwise, my discussion is based on the sixth edition (Bagdikian 2000).
9. Michael Parenti (1993), for example, cites him six times in chapter 2 and six more times in chapter 3. See also Herman and Chomsky 1988, 4–5; and McChesney 1999, 19.
10. Actually, in the 1983 edition of his book, Bagdikian looked at *six* major types of media — the five listed in the text above, plus radio—and concluded that 50 corporations controlled more than half of the business in all six types combined. See Bagdikian 1983, 7–20. By 1987, however, he had dropped radio from the list, for no apparent reason except that it was an “exception” to the general pattern. “Had radio been excluded” from the 1983 list, he noted in 1987 (19–20), “the fifty dominant corporations would have been forty-six.” The number of dominant media corporations then declined, according to Bagdikian's figures, to 29 in 1987 and 23 in 1990. For whatever reason, the 1990 count has not been updated in subsequent editions: the list of corporations in the sixth edition, published in 2000 (21–24), is identical with that published ten years earlier.
11. Conservatives might disagree with Bagdikian about the proper remedies for these problems, but that is a different matter.
12. The count excludes Chomsky's purely linguistic works, pamphlets, books published in foreign languages, and a considerable number of videotapes and sound recordings based on interviews with or lectures by Chomsky. It does include second and all other subsequent editions, where these included revisions or new material, and a number of books that consisted of extended interviews with Chomsky edited by someone else.
13. This account draws on Kolbert 1993; Kurtz 1993a, 1993b; Byron 1993; and Mashberg 1993.
14. Paul Good, as quoted in Lichter, Rothman, and Lichter 1986, 151.
15. For example, the sentence quoted in Bagdikian's paragraph now reads, “The original proposal for AJAX came from British intelligence after all efforts to get the Mossadegh to reverse his nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) had failed.” See Roosevelt 1979, 3. According to Thomas Powers, this arrangement was worked out between the CIA and the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) as “the best way out of the mess.” See Powers 1980, 437.
16. By “commercial considerations,” Gans means that stories were occasionally

chosen because they would attract or hold an audience, or that stories were not covered because it was too expensive to do so—not that stories were chosen on the basis of their compatibility with commercials. For a more detailed explanation, see Gans 1980, 214–20.

17. On this issue as well, Gans (1980, 257) has a more nuanced discussion.
18. In this case, Bagdikian does interpret his source correctly (see Joseph 1981), though the alleged misdeeds occurred in the 1960s and 1970s.

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