

## “Whoever Controls the Media, Controls the Mind”

Media concentration in [the U.S. and Brazil] has reached phenomenal levels, and it is compounded by the massive spread of pernicious fake news.

By [Asad Ismi](#)

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*The above quote attributed to Jim Morrison, lead singer of '60s rock band The Doors, could have been said today about the United States and Brazil. Media concentration in both countries has reached phenomenal levels, and it is compounded by the massive spread of pernicious fake news.*

Conn Hallinan, a columnist with *Foreign Policy in Focus*, a project of the Washington, D.C.-based Institute for Policy Studies, tells me that when Ben Bagdikian published his book *The New Media Monopoly* in 2004, there were 100 corporations controlling media outlets in the U.S. As of September 2020, six corporations control 90 per cent of media outlets in the U.S.: AT&T, CBS, Comcast, Disney, News Corp and Viacom.

Hallinan adds that:

“people read what those [six] corporations want them to read, and corporations like lower taxes, fewer financial and environmental regulations, in short, whatever makes them the most money. Since profits are the bottom line, staffs are cut back, papers are merged, and stories dumbed down to not upset anyone. So fewer papers, fewer reporters, tighter budgets (which means no investigative reporting) and a less informed population. Because democracy only works when people are informed enough to make choices, democracy is diminished.”

As Mickey Huff has said, (in a video panel discussion), six corporations controlling the media is just another sign among many others that the U.S. is not a democracy.

Huff, who is director of Project Censored, a U.S. media literacy organization, describes the country as “an inverted totalitarian state, sort of a corporate society governed with illusions that [the state] responds to the people every four years [after a ballot] riddled with election fraud.” He points out that “even the elitists at Princeton University and Northwestern University have called the U.S. a plutocracy and an oligarchy [in 2013].”

Nolan Higdon, who co-authored a book about the U.S. media with Huff titled *The United States of Distraction* (2019), agrees that the country is not a democracy, and this is partly due to media concentration. Higdon is also author of *The Anatomy of Fake News: A Critical News Literacy Education* (University of California Press, 2020) and a lecturer in media studies and history at the University of California at Santa Cruz. He tells me about the effects of media concentration in the U.S., where legacy media is both made up of and seeks the approval of economic and political elites, and is used as a divide- and-conquer-strategy by those same elites.

While it is enforcing oligarchy inside the U.S., the mainstream media is also giving a warped view of the outside world to Americans, encouraging support for a foreign policy grounded in endless war. Even Donald Trump admitted this was the case when he was president.

“As a result,” Higdon says,

“their reporting and messaging does not veer into populist discourses that reflect the will of the majority of people or the issues that concern them.... Instead, they reduce everything to a narrow frame of Republicans versus Democrats. The audience tunes into MSNBC or CNN or reads *The Washington Post* or *The New York Times* to boo Republicans and cheer Democrats. And users of Fox News Channel, *Forbes*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and Breitbart do the same to cheer Republicans and boo Democrats....The emphasis on what divides us distracts from the neoliberal ideology of empire that binds parties and the elite class that fund, support, and run them.”

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As Higdon puts it,

“Americans hear almost nothing about what is going on overseas.” He points out how, with very few foreign correspondents on the ground, legacy media now rely extensively on military and intelligence experts: “These are folks who have a vested interest in perpetuating war and denigrating the so-called enemy. Since most people in news media are trained on how to sound like experts...Americans receive military talking points as journalism.”

Compounding all this is the massive rise of fake news—one example of many being the scapegoating of Russia for stealing the 2016 election for Donald Trump.

Media concentration’s other compounding factor is the rise of big tech companies. In 2020 Google, Facebook and Amazon received the majority of all advertising spending in the U.S., and Amazon chief Jeff Bezos even owns *The Washington Post*. This incredible concentration of resources has meant the demise of many progressive alternative news media outlets.

Meanwhile, powerful platforms like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and YouTube make for very rapid diffusion of fake news.

Higdon calls the big tech companies “twenty-first century snake oil salesmen” who have a “profit model predicated on keeping people addicted to their screens by privileging sensational content that appeals to negative human emotions. That is what fake news is.”

Brazil presents a similar picture to that of the U.S., with only 11 families controlling the most important media conglomerates. Politicians and religious groups play significant roles in this media oligopoly.

Hallinan is also alarmed by the rise of big tech companies and fake news: “Americans have always been fed fake news, but not so much so quickly, without much in the way of dissenting voices. I have grave fears for the future.”

Brazil presents a similar picture to that of the U.S., with only 11 families controlling the most important media conglomerates. Politicians and religious groups play significant roles in this media oligopoly.

Grupo Globo (which owns TV Globo) is the country’s biggest media conglomerate. It reaches all of Brazil and has “an unmatched influence in politics, economy and society,” according to Sherlock Communications, a Latin American public relations firm. More than 70 per cent of Brazil’s TV audience is divided between four networks, with TV Globo getting more than half of this. The other major conglomerates are Record, Band and SBT. TV Globo is also the largest commercial TV network in Latin America and the second-largest in the world after the American Broadcasting Company.

In the print press, about 50 per cent of Brazilian readers turn to only four companies: Globo, Folha, RBS and Sada. Online media content is dominated by only four companies: G1, UOL, R7 and IGm, which together have almost 60 per cent of the online media audience.

Associate professor Helder Ferreira Do Vale teaches international studies at Xi’an Jiaotong-Liverpool University in China and is an expert in Brazilian politics. He tells me that Brazil’s media concentration has consequences for the country’s democracy because it negatively affects political accountability and government transparency. “Such high media concentration is obstructing a much-needed social transformation in a country that remains one of the most unequal in the world,” he adds.

João Feres Júnior, professor of political science at the State University of Rio de Janeiro, agrees with Ferreira Do Vale when he explains to me that “media concentration facilitates oligarchy in Brazil by embracing an ideological position that favours the rich against the interests of the poor. When the media promote less taxes, less government and more private business in a country that still has a lot of poverty and social problems that can only be ameliorated through state intervention and redistribution, then the media is going against the majority of the population.”

According to OXFAM, the six richest men in Brazil have wealth equivalent to the approximately 100 million people who make up the poorest 50 per cent of the population. And the income of the country’s richest 5 per cent is equivalent to the income of the remaining 95 per cent. This elite monopolizes enormous economic and political power with its control over the media, perpetuating extreme inequality and right-wing dominance.

This dominance endangers democracy. Marcos Napolitano, professor of history at the University of São Paulo emphasizes to me that “many values that guide our political and social life are still elitist, products of an oligarchic and anti-popular liberalism forged in the 19th century in a context of a slavery[-based] society. Throughout Brazilian history, the main media groups in Brazil have opposed elected leftist governments, even moderate ones, as they did in 1964 (when the military overthrew a progressive government) and in 2016, when the media helped to overthrow leftist President Dilma Rousseff of the Workers Party.”

Ferreira Do Vale adds that

“Brazilian media has often created and disseminated information and content that favours traditional values and a parochial political culture based on low appreciation for freedom of expression, individual rights, and open debate. This tendency has been increasing with the growing participation of evangelical families in the telecommunication sector in Brazil.”

Media concentration in Brazil is muddled even more by the participation of politicians in the sector. Although this is prohibited by Brazilian law, Ferreira Do Vale says this stipulation is “bluntly ignored” by those who are supposed to be lawmakers.

The combination of fake news with a traditional right-wing media has helped produce not just a conservative government in Brazil but an explicitly neofascist one.

As of 2018, 32 representatives and eight senators sitting in Brazil’s National Congress owned broadcasting companies. This leads to ridiculously corrupt situations such as legislators participating in decisions to grant themselves broadcasting licenses.

The combination of fake news with a traditional right-wing media has helped produce not just a conservative government in Brazil but an explicitly neofascist one. Since (and before) his election in 2018, President Jair Bolsonaro has openly displayed his hatred for women, the LGBTQI community, and Indigenous and Black people. He has called for the killing of leftists, the destruction of the Brazilian Amazon rainforest and the restoration of military dictatorship.

With 141 million mobile internet users, Brazil is “fertile ground for the massive use of fake news,” says Ferreira Do Vale. And he points out how Brazil’s media concentration created an even riper environment for fake news, because it is one “without opposing opinion, debate and dissent.” For Ferreira Do Vale, Brazil’s fertile fake news environment allows opportunist politicians like Bolsonaro to flourish:

“[He] never had a clear political agenda and a plan of action to solve Brazil’s problems so he often resorts to fake news to hide his lack of viable ideas and propositions to lead Brazil. Also Bolsinaro employs fake news to divert public attention in moments of crisis.”

Significantly, according to Ferreira Do Vale,

“It is increasingly clear that Bolsonaro greatly benefited from fake news to win the 2018 presidential election. He resorted to demagogic rumours (for example, the hacking of the Brazilian electronic voting system by the Venezuelan government) disseminated through WhatsApp messages sent from foreign cell phone chips to illegally acquired phone lists.”

Ferreira Do Vale adds that a Brazilian fact-checking organization called Aos Fatos found that

“in three critical days (October 14, 15 and 16) of the presidential election campaign of 2018, 1,504 WhatsApp accounts sent to different WhatsApp groups 14,090 messages containing fake news against Bolsonaro’s political opponents.”

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