

Megamedia: How Giant Corporations Dominate Mass Media, Distort Competition, and Endanger Democracy

By Dean Alger. Maryland, USA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998, 277 pp.

The uncompromising subtitle of Dean Alger's *Megamedia* makes his position on media monopoly absolutely clear. Although Alger has an impressive academic background, the book is intended for an intelligent general audience as well as for those with more specialist or professional interests in media and public affairs. Underlying the book is Alger's fierce commitment to the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which he regards as "the prime pillar of the Bill of Rights" (p. 1). Alger notes that the news media are absolutely central to the functioning of democracy, while entertainment and other features and programs in the mass media have powerful effects on society more generally. For Alger, the essence of the First Amendment's central provision is to ensure that the principal sources of information and ideas directed at the public are genuinely independent and diverse

voices which will maintain and promote a healthy democratic society. He writes, "We should be greatly concerned if much or most of the main media fall increasingly under the control of a small number of giant corporations and extremely wealthy and willful people, especially when such people are inclined to use the powerful media of mass communication for their own political and economic purposes" (pp. 1–2).

Of course for Alger there is no "if." *Megamedia* is a highly readable account of how it in fact did happen, the implications of the current situation, and the implications for democracy should the present process not be stopped. The book is clearly written and coherently structured. Composed of nine chapters, each one is logically connected to its predecessor: chapter one details the growth of "megamedia," chapter two investigates the meaning of democracy and the ways in which developments in the mass media affect the democratic process, chapter three offers a detailed account of the structure of ownership and control of the media, chapter four reviews the key elements of the 1996 Telecommunications Act, which significantly changed telephone and mass media law in the United States, chapters five and six discuss and analyze the consequences of the patterns of ownership and control of the media, chapter six focuses on news operations that are part of conglomerates and other large multimedia corporations, chapter seven examines megamedia patterns in various nations around the world, chapter eight attempts to put in perspective the patterns and trends in the ownership and control of the mass media and their relation to our societies and the democratic process, and chapter nine discusses a number of ways to assure a true diversity of independent sources of news and opinion.

The overall picture of media control that Alger paints is a disturbing one. He has a firm grasp of media history and often makes his most-telling points by comparing the past with the present:

In 1900, 559 cities in America — over 60 percent of cities with daily newspapers — had competing papers. But by the mid-1990s, fewer than 30 cities had competing dailies — 0.2 percent of cities with daily newspapers ... By 1997, Gannett's 92 daily newspapers, with total daily circulation of about 6 million, and Knight-Ridder's 35 dailies with total circulation of 4.3 million, meant just two chains reached roughly 25 million in actual daily readership, since each paper is read by about 2.5 people, on average. (p. 31)

However, the traditional mass medium of newspapers is only the beginning of the story of concentration of ownership. Increasingly, the megamedia giants have become multimedia owners — owners of various combinations of broadcast and cable TV networks, TV and radio stations, cable TV distribution systems, satellite TV systems, movie and TV entertainment program production companies, book and magazine publishing, and Internet operations, as well as newspapers.

For Alger, a matter of even greater concern is that mass media have increasingly become the property of huge corporate conglomerates that he defines as "a cor-

poration that owns businesses in a variety of commercial markets" (p. 31). Alger suggests that a dozen megamedia corporations dominate mass media in the world today, the "Dominant Dozen," and he goes on to list them in order of size and importance: Disney-Capital Cities-ABC; Time Warner-Turner; News Corporation, Bertelsmann; General Electric-NBC; CBS Inc.; Newhouse/Advance Publications; Viacom; Microsoft; Matra-Hachette-Filipacchi; Gannett; and Tele-Communications Inc. At the centre of Alger's book is his concern that such conglomerate control raises serious questions about the consequences for news coverage, economic competition on a level playing field, and other economic and sociopolitical issues. He notes that conflicts of interest must arise when matters relating to various commercial areas of the parent conglomerate become public issues: military contracting and cost overruns or faulty products, for example, and he asks "Is there a danger that the NBC news division will pull its punches when reporting on developments involving its parent corporation, or not go after the story in the first place?" (p. 32) His own answer to this question, of course, is in the affirmative.

For Alger, the issue of conglomerate control is one that is directly antagonistic to the fundamental ethos of democracy. If conglomerates control the principal means of communication, there is little likelihood, he suggests, of a vigorous democratic dialogue. An important part of Alger's own agenda is to demonstrate the ways in which the present situation came about, and his grasp of general history, not solely media history, is crucial to his overall argument. Plato, Benjamin Franklin, Abraham Lincoln, Adam Smith, and John Dewey all feature prominently in the early sections of *Megamedia*, as Alger seeks to contextualize his argument by noting that a central principle in democratic theory has been the need for a genuine, open marketplace of ideas if a democracy is to function well. He approvingly quotes Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black:

The First Amendment rests on the assumption that the widest possible dissemination of information from diverse and antagonistic sources is essential to the welfare of the public ... Surely a command that the government itself shall not impede the free flow of ideas does not afford nongovernmental combinations a refuge if they impose restraints upon that constitutionally guaranteed freedom. (p. 20)

Although Alger's portrayal of megamedia and its implications for the democratic process as it currently stands is far from optimistic, he concludes his book with a chapter alliteratively entitled "Accountability, Alternatives, and Action" in which he presents what he sees as possible alternatives to the current systems. He suggests, for example, that there should be one or more significant, fully independent alternative outlets within the main media channels so that widespread public exposure to the alternative media material is achieved as a matter of natural accessing of media, and not stuck in the nether reaches of cable and satellite TV systems where more effort is required to gain access to it. In addition, he argues, the

increasing reliance on big corporate funding sources for public TV and radio and the inevitable corporate influence must be cut back or eliminated entirely. Concomitantly, the enhanced public TV and radio services must also be linked to a substantial, top-quality Internet operation that is co-ordinated with the offerings on TV and radio. To assure independence, Alger insists that there needs to be more insulation from the political meddling by some presidents and forces in Congress that has been in recent times all too pervasive. Currently, presidential appointments are made (with Senate approval) to the Board of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), which is the chief policymaker regarding programming and related matters.

Alger has some good, if controversial, ideas for funding Public Broadcasting, including a small tax on television and radio advertising, which he proposes to call "the public purposes advertising tax." Here, he suggests that in order to protect small media and small businesses the tax should only apply over a certain level; for example, for all advertising buys from a given company in a given media outlet above the \$5,000 level. A further revenue possibility, he suggests, is to borrow from the British model and institute a small tax, possibly one percent, on each TV and radio set sold: for sales involving radios, the money would go to public radio; for TVs, the money would go to PBS. All such income generated would be deposited in a Democratic Diversity in Communications Fund (DDC Fund) to be used for the augmented support of public TV and radio and to provide access to cable and satellite channels.

A prime use of this DCC fund would be to enhance access to cable and satellite television, and Alger is bullish in his insistence that a set of local-access channels should be a federal requirement for every system, since many municipal governments have failed in this responsibility. These reserved channels on local cable TV systems should come with studios, editing facilities, videocams, and other means of facilitating alternative, community-based program material. Financial support from the DCC Fund should be provided to defray organizing, personnel, and other program development costs, and, crucially, community people, not people who work for the cable monopolies should be hired to administer the program in coordination with community nonprofit public service organizations.

Megamedia is an excellent book: well-researched and informative on an issue of vital importance, with the imagination and the energy to envisage ways out of a situation that clearly poses grave dangers to Western democracy.

Kevin McCarron
Senior Lecturer in American Literature,
Roehampton Institute, London