

The conquest of speech by media conglomerates*

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The conquering of media by huge financial conglomerates is not of course a new phenomenon and, in fact, constituted the inevitable consequence of neoliberal globalization. The opening and, particularly, the “liberalization” of media markets (in the sense of the drastic restriction of regulations in the operation of media), supposedly for the sake of “pluralism” and the suppression of state monopolies, had precisely the opposite effect. The proliferation of media and particularly of TV channels, not only did not lead to pluralism in information but, on the contrary, it led to an unprecedented concentration in the ownership and control of information and the consequent standardisation of it and direct or indirect censorship. Today, private and state channels, not only present the “information” in an almost identical way, which expresses the stand of the economic and the political elites –except in cases where there are conflicting interests on a particular news story between parts of the elites– but also compete with each other in reflecting present insignificance, if not vulgarity, for the sake of television or radio ratings and advertising proceeds. The new important element in this process is that, after the conquering of the media and particularly the TV channels by financial conglomerates, it was the turn of book publishers to be conquered, leading to an indirect authoritarian censorship of ideas – against which, fortunately, and at least for the time being, “small” publishers still resist.

In reality, what we face today is the systematic organization of ideological globalization by the transnational elite and its branches in the international media. It is they who control what news we learn and how we learn it –fully, partially, or not at all– according to their own “agenda”, which also determines the framework of the political dialogue. Thus, as the well-known, independent journalist John Pilger points out:

“Consider how the power of this invisible government has grown. In 1983 the principle global media was owned by 50 corporations, most of them American. In 2002 this had fallen to just 9 corporations. Today it is probably about 5. Rupert Murdoch has predicted that there will be just three global media giants, and his company will be one of them”.^[1]

Naturally, this forecast is in the course of self-verification, since Murdoch’s group already controls about 180 international newspapers, among them *The Times* of London, the *New York Post* and the just acquired *Wall Street Journal* –the 2nd in circulation American newspaper– the television channel Fox, Hollywood’s 21st Century Fox, many satellite channels, among which the well-known Sky, and, beyond them, publishers like HarperCollins and a growing activity in the internet (buying-out of MySpace, etc.).

The ideological domination is the inevitable consequence of the economic one. In 2003, all 175 Murdoch newspapers and channels supported the invasion of Iraq. The consequence was that, as an independent inquiry showed in October 2003, 60% of US television viewers believed the propaganda on Saddam's possession of weapons of mass destruction, or his Al Qa'ida ties, etc. but, while only 23 percent of independent channels' viewers believed these fairy tales, the corresponding figure for Murdoch's Fox viewers climbed to 80 percent of viewers!^[2] Correspondingly, none of the publishing houses owned by the large groups (the top five of which control 80% of general interest books) published a single critical book about the Iraq war and Bush's foreign policy. The many books that were critical all came from small, independent firms.^[3] Similarly, in Britain, Murdoch was considered the "24th member" of Blair's government and was even given 'veto' power over EU by Tony Blair.^[4] However, even more important were the indirect consequences of Murdoch's brainwashing. Through his channels and newspapers, he has discredited and obfuscated the national liberation struggle of Palestinians, while through a parallel defamatory campaign against the supposedly "liberalism" of the BBC, has pushed the latter into an explicit pro-Zionist presentation of news –and yet the Zionist lobbies speak of a pro-Palestinian bias! And here are the results of this "unbiased" briefing: A recent study at Glasgow University revealed the astonishing fact that over 70% of young people surveyed did not know that East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza are under military occupation by the Israeli army, whereas 11% believe it is the Palestinians who are occupying that land!^[5]

These phenomena are not, of course, confined to the Anglo-Saxon space. The role of Berlusconi-owned channels in Italy (he is the owner of three out of the seven national TV channels), or of the media owned by Kirsh in Germany, is well-known in introducing the neoliberal globalisation policies (low taxes, drastic cuts in public expenditure, privatisations, etc.). Correspondingly, in France, two thirds of all French newspapers and magazines are owned by Dassault and Lagardère, France's leading arms' manufacturers. Furthermore, Lagardère's affiliate, Hachette, also owns the majority of French publishing houses, as well as controlling a large part of the book and magazine distribution network.^[6] These conglomerates played a decisive role for the victory of the transnational elite's chosen, Nikolas Sarkozy. Still, more important is the fact that the buy-out of media and publishers is not usually done on account of speculation, but for political reasons, as even Serge Dassault admitted when he bought the Figaro.

In Greece as well, after the media conquering by conglomerates, a relevant trend has emerged in book publishing. Although the details are few and sparse, two cases from our own experience are indicative. In the first case, a well-known "big" publisher (Kastaniotis), despite his conventional obligation to reprint my book "Inclusive Democracy" when out of stock, he refused to do so, although the book had been out of stock for a long time. This, despite the fact that the book has already been published in seven main languages, among which is Chinese! Fortunately, the "small" publishers, who usually do not decide publication on speculative considerations or of controlling the flow of information, were happy to undertake the publication of a new edition of the book (Free Press, May 2008). In the second case, another "big" publisher (Ellinika Grammata) who had commissioned the publication of a volume of essays by well-known intellectuals and analysts of the international and Greek Left, regarding the current crisis and the Left in relation to Inclusive Democracy, (edited by the well-known American writer and professor of philosophy Steven Best) recently denied its publication, following the completion of a time-consuming and expensive translation of the essays involved. It was hardly accidental that

this event happened immediately after the transfer of ownership from Ellinika Grammata to the Labrakis Conglomerate –which is reputed to be recently also involved in Kastaniotis publishing, mentioned above! Still, once again, "small" publishers undertook to publish the book in 2008, in Greek and possibly in English as well.

However, despite the valuable help offered by small independent publishers today, there is no doubt that, within the present system, they are bound to either be extinguished and possibly integrated –or, at best, marginalised– by the conglomerates. As I tried to show elsewhere,^[7] the only viable solution for the transitional period towards a free society is the creation of an alternative media/publishing network, as part of a transitional strategy towards a genuine democratic society, like the one suggested by the Inclusive Democracy project. The aim of such a network should be to develop an alternative consciousness to the present one regarding the methods of solving the economic and ecological problems in a democratic way. In other words, a consciousness meeting the imperative need of connecting today's multi-dimensional crisis to the present socio-economic system and making proposals on how to start building the new society.

* – A shorter version of this article was published in the fortnightly column of Takis Fotopoulos in the mass circulation Athens daily, *Eleftherotypia*, (02/02/2008).

[1] John Pilger, *Democracy Now* (8/7/2007).

[2] Paul Krugman, "Dark days for the US press", *Guardian* (2/7/2007).

[3] Andre Schiffrin, "Funds For A Wider Range Of Voices", *Le Monde diplomatique* (October 2007).

[4] Andy McSmith, "Blair gave Murdoch 'veto' over EU says PM's ex-aide", *The Guardian* (18/9/2005).

[5] Karma Nabulsi, "Leaders who follow ordinary people's courage earn respect", *The Guardian* (15/5/2007).

[6] Andre Schiffrin, see "Funds For A Wider Range Of Voices"

[7] T. Fotopoulos, "[Mass media, Culture and Democracy](#)", *Democracy & Nature*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (March 1999).