



Book Review

Media Concentration and Democracy: Why Ownership Matters

C. Edwin Baker

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Media Concentration and Democracy is a challenging book. Written out of concern with the role of modern media in US society, the book presents media concentration as a serious threat to a democratic public sphere, and advocates ‘the widest possible dispersal of media ownership’ as the only proper, democratic way to organize the media sector.

The main argument of the book is essentially and explicitly normative. It rests upon the claim that normative theory of democracy requires a structurally egalitarian distribution of ‘communicative power’. This position is eloquently argued against the author’s main opponents: free market advocates who favour deregulation, and lawyers who consider media concentration restrictions at odds with the First Amendment. The polemical style of the book, however, does not do justice to the richness of the author’s analysis and argument, which clearly shows that concentration of ownership is but one factor influencing how media perform their informative roles in modern societies.

Media as Mediators in a Complex Democracy

Mass media perform different functions. In his book, Baker highlights their democratic role as mediators between the public and the government; mediators that enable and facilitate public opinion formation, that express public opinion to policy makers, and that check the powers of government and businesses. Given this crucial role, Baker argues, democratic values should guide the organization of the media sector and media regulation. What are these democratic values? Baker opts for what he calls ‘complex democracy’, involving both the liberal pluralist ideal of fair struggle and compromise between different people or groups with different interests — as reflected in the one man/one vote principle — and the civic republican ideal of an inclusive, community-wide public discourse in search for the ‘common good’.

Translated to the media sector, the liberal-pluralist ideal requires the dispersal of media power. This is the democratic distribution principle: concentration of media power in the hands of a few is fundamentally at odds with basic democratic values. Every group in society should have its own



media that express its concerns and provide room for internal discussion. The republican ideal, in contrast, calls for ‘inclusive media’ that serve the entire society, expressing and confronting ideas from different groups. Such inclusive media are much more compatible with media concentration. Baker acknowledges the tension between both concepts of democracy, also when applied to the media sector, but nevertheless chooses to elaborate the democratic distribution principle, and thus primarily emphasizes the need to reduce media concentration.

Chapter Overview

The democratic distribution principle is Baker’s major but not the only reason to oppose media ownership concentration. Another important reason is that dispersal of ownership provides important democratic safeguards. It prevents media owners from exercising enormous power (the Berlusconi effect), it increases the likelihood that at least some owners will critically follow governments and corporations, and it makes media less vulnerable to influence, coercion and corruption. The third major reason is that dispersal of ownership increases the likelihood that the average media owner is more interested in providing quality journalism than in increasing profits (because media organizations will be necessarily smaller).

After presenting his case for media ownership dispersal in the first chapter, Baker dismisses in the next three chapters four counterarguments. The first is that convergence, among others, has resulted in a competitive media market where no owner has market power. The second and third are that market forces ensure that even large media organizations serve audiences properly; and that the Internet is making media concentration a phenomenon of the past. The last counterargument is a legal one, claiming that the First Amendment prohibits government restrictions on media concentration. In rebuffing these arguments, Baker argues — among others — that different media serve different audiences and needs and therefore do not compete on the same market; that market forces give media organizations adequate scope (and therefore power) to make content choices; that the Internet is even more concentrated than other media sectors; and that the First Amendment protects the public rather than media organizations. His ultimate argument is that his opponents adopt a too reductionist view. They focus only on the commodities that media organizations offer to individual consumers, without taking the wider needs of society into account. The need to distribute communicative power, the need to provide safeguards against risks and the need for quality content are simply not commodities that a market provides.

The final two chapters discuss solutions. Chapter Five basically discusses policies to reduce concentration, whereas the Postscript presents other policies



that may advance the same goals as dispersing media ownership. It is especially in this latter chapter that it becomes clear that media concentration is only part of the problem, and media ownership dispersal part of the solution. For example, Baker notes that dispersal of ownership does not guarantee that owners will come from different social groups; and that there are more direct ways of ensuring that media ownership lies in the hands of owners who are interested in providing quality content than in making profits (e.g., by establishing a public broadcaster).

Discussion

Media concentration is an important topic. Baker widens and refreshes the ongoing debate by putting the policy and scholarly discussion on media concentration in a clear normative democratic framework. Starting from the observation that media play an important role in modern democracies, he forcefully reminds us that media accordingly should be organized in a democratic way. Democracy requires that media power is structurally dispersed, regardless of how media organizations actually operate. This emphasis on process values is in my view the most important contribution of Baker's book. It complements prevailing media concentration analysis where the implications of concentration (or competition) for actual media contents are investigated. For example, where prevailing media-economic analysis investigates how competition influences diversity of media content, Baker argues that diversity is not an end in itself. In his view, media contents needs only to be diverse when there are different opinions in society, and media ownership dispersal will ensure that these opinions are reflected in media content. When, in contrast, debate results in a common view, there is no need (any more) for media content to be diverse.

The emphasis on process values is — in my view, unfortunately — embedded in and to some extent subordinated to a political plea for the widest possible dispersal of media ownership. As indicated above, Baker's notion of a complex democracy demands both partisan media — that express the views and carry the debates of different groups — as well as inclusive media — where different groups meet and develop a common view. Baker admits that ownership dispersal is not necessary for, and might even conflict with the need for inclusive media, yet he does not elaborate this apparent contradiction. The notion of a complex democracy is briefly mentioned in the first chapter, but only elaborated in the fourth. In between, the book focuses on the democratic distribution principle and the need for partisan media, which better fit his argument in favour of ownership dispersal. The other side of the story and the scholarly and policy challenges that arise when we apply the notion of a complex democracy to the media are primarily and cursory dealt with in the Postscript.



Baker's emphasis on dispersal will fit the American situation, but reduces in my view the attractiveness of his book for European scholars who might consider segmentation of audiences and thus fragmentation of the public sphere as serious a threat as media concentration.

When focusing on his basic argument *contra* media concentration, I find some issues missing. According to Baker, ownership dispersal should bring more and smaller media outlets. This reduces available resources per medium outlet. Since the production of quality information is expensive — requiring effort, time, devotion and money — dispersal might destroy the conditions that are necessary to produce the types of content — quality journalism — that democracy needs most. Baker briefly alludes to this problem, but does not elaborate it. This is striking because the pooling of resources to produce quality content is one major argument in favour of concentration. Of course, Baker is right in arguing that large media organizations do not necessarily use available resources to produce better content. This suggests, in my view, that commercialization might be a bigger problem than concentration *per se* in the media sector. Again, Baker raises this issue without really discussing it. A third issue that in my view requires more explicit elaboration is the distinction between different levels of concentration. Baker focuses on ownership concentration (one owner owning more outlets), but also refers to editorial concentration (more outlets being produced by one editorial board) and audience concentration (expressing the preference of audiences for a few titles). Making these distinctions explicit, and using them consistently throughout the book, might improve the argument.

On the positive side, Baker does raise and discuss many important topics that touch upon the role of media in modern democracy. An example, not mentioned so far, is his argument that media should not be owned by non-media organizations, to prevent the risk of interference of non-media interests in the production of media content. Also his arguments that the plethora of media outlets does not rule out that specific audiences are served by monopolistic media, and that attention on the Internet is concentrated on but a few virtual destinations, are important and useful interventions in an important debate. All in all, I consider Baker's book not a definite answer to free market advocates. Instead, it is a good start of a necessary discussion what the role of media in modern democracies should mean for the way we organize the media sector. I expect the book to put this discussion more at the core of the media concentration debate.

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