

SCIENCE AND NATURAL HISTORY FILM AND
THE LARGER MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the ways in which science and natural history films are affected by the larger media environment and in particular, concentrated ownership structures. This first part of this examination is aimed at establishing that the corporate conglomerates that own the majority of mainstream media outlets and resources have sufficient control over the media environment to warrant speaking about specialized programming like science and natural history within the context of the larger corporate-owned environment. The remainder of the paper discusses the impacts this media environment has on science and natural history film. These impacts consist primarily of excessive commercial influence and a loss of diversity in programming. To explain and describe these effects, the paper uses a model of how the political and economic interests of these media monopolies led to a corporate bias and agenda that serves to filter the films that gain access to mainstream media outlets. This examination relies on a wide variety of data and case studies to support its arguments.

INTRODUCTION

This paper argues that the current media environment, particularly the concentrated ownership structure, has a variety of impacts on the diversity and quality of science and natural history (SNH) films. This argument builds and relies on another assertion, which is that SNH films are indeed a part of and heavily influenced by the larger media environment. This paper will discuss the ways in which SNH films are dependent on the larger media environment and how the concentrated ownership structure works to undermine film's ability to increase our understanding and awareness of issues relating to SNH. The contention of this paper is that a system of creation and distribution that has something more on the agenda than profit would be vastly better at allowing SNH films to do their work, which as this paper defines it, is to facilitate a multi-faceted understanding and awareness of the world around us.

Although the bias that a highly concentrated, commercial media imparts to SNH film is widespread, in many cases it manifests itself in subtle and systemic ways, making it hard to document and seldom discussed. Bringing awareness to the issue of how the agenda of media companies effects SNH films is not simple. The filtration of content to fit a particular bias and agenda is often concealed under the countless legitimate editorial decisions that must be made. Most pervasive of all is a sort of self-censorship that takes place at various levels as filmmakers, producers and executives try to conform to the overall atmosphere of the particular broadcaster or

corporation for which they work. As Ben H. Bagdikian points out in *The Media*

Monopoly:

In most cases there is no *visible* imposition of the parent firm's policies, and the policies are often not absolute, conditioned as they are by the desire for profits. Some intervention by owners is direct and blunt. But most of the screening is subtle, some not even occurring at a conscious level, as when subordinates learn by habit to conform to owners' ideas.

Subtle or not, the ultimate result is distorted reality and impoverished ideas.

My intent here is not so much to prove irrefutably, as it is to draw attention to the ways in which SNH films are susceptible to forces in the larger media environment.

This paper is an attempt, through examples and a logical examination of existing structures and systems, to elucidate the process by which enormous corporations control the vast majority of resources available to SNH filmmakers and how this situation imparts a pervasive bias and agenda and limits the diversity of the SNH to which the public has access.

THE ROLE OF SCIENCE AND NATURAL HISTORY FILM IN OUR SOCIETY

Media plays a critical role in our society. As citizens, we get the majority of our views and understandings of the world around us from the mainstream media (Shah, 2004). SNH films have become, in modern times, the biggest source of information we have about the critical environmental, scientific, and technological issues that form the backbone of our society. Conversely, it is in the mainstream media that SNH films find their biggest audience. A 1984 National Cancer Institute survey regarding how people get their information about ways to prevent cancer found that 58.3 percent got their information from the television (National Cancer Institute 1984), and it is unlikely that the public's reliance on visual media has decreased since then. Due to a wide variety of factors, from an increasingly technocratic society to innumerable advances in media technology and advertising (driven largely by marketing efforts that are bringing screens to billboards, the sides of buildings, and nearly every other square inch of flat real estate), visual media is playing an increasingly large role in our lives. The average person watches 29.5 hours of television a week! (Johnston, 2000).

Not only do SNH films teach us about what science has found out about the world we live in but they are also an important way in which we learn about the process of science itself. This particular function is critical because the process of science is poorly understood by much of the public and a fundamental understanding

of the process of science helps us to sift more accurately through the flood of “scientific” information that confronts us on a daily basis. Poor science programming can mislead and disempower a public that is increasingly affected by science and technology. In the words of New York University professor Dorothy Nelkin,

Science is a part of common culture, integrally tied to social practices, public policies, and political affairs. Frequent reports of outrageous science scandals and technological risks remind us not only of our dependence on the media for timely information about science and technology but also of the limits of what we can learn from the press. People are not receiving the critical and comprehensive reporting about science and technology so essential in contemporary society, where most decisions rest on technological expertise (Nelkin 1995).

As visual media continues to replace print media in our society, these statements become increasingly relevant to SNH films. A healthy media, one in which the public has access to a broad and diverse selection of programming, is essential to the proper functioning of society. Particularly important are films about science, both for informing consumers (e.g. the costs/benefits of the products we buy such as impacts on the environment and our personal health) and for informing participants in a democracy. Science forms the basis of much policy and a basic understanding of, for example, military or energy technologies or environmental sciences (e.g. global warming) is crucial for effective participation in a democracy.

AN EXPANDED UNDERSTANDING OF SCIENCE AND NATURAL HISTORY FILM AND ITS PLACE IN THE LARGER MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

In order to argue that the current concentration of ownership in the larger media environment has effects that are problematic for SNH films, it is necessary to first establish that SNH films, perhaps counter to conventional thought within the industry, *are* indeed intertwined with and profoundly affected by the larger media environment. The first thing we need is a more expansive definition of documentary film.

The lines we draw between genres of visual media, especially in terms of the credibility of the content, are inherently blurred and arbitrary. General public ignorance about the process of filmmaking leads to a lack of understanding regarding the limitless ways in which reality can be misrepresented by even the most well-intentioned films. Drawing a line between documentary and fiction is often not nearly as straightforward as it might seem. The media environment is ever-changing and the SNH content to which we're exposed is not limited to the classic one-hour specials on *Nature* or *National Geographic Explorer*. Increasingly, SNH "film" reaches us through museum displays, advertising, news "stories" (mini-documentaries produced by third parties for the broadcaster), docudrama, reality TV, presenter driven travel shows, infomercials, and so on. A broader definition of SNH film allows us to see the myriad of ways that the larger media environment affects

SNH film. For the purposes of this paper, the “larger media environment”, in particular as it relates to SNH film, refers primarily to the ownership structure that gives giant companies profound power to influence distribution and access to mainstream media outlets.

Many options and venues exist for SNH film including film festivals, independent sales, various museum and display installations, and theatrical release, but of all these, television broadcast is by far the biggest. The number of hours the average person spends at film festivals, museums and other SNH film venues cannot possibly challenge the 29.5 hours of TV the average person watches per week (Johnston, 2000). Establishing television as the single biggest venue for SNH films locates the genre directly in the middle of the larger commercially driven media environment. This situation results in the majority of SNH films being subjected to commercial broadcast criteria, which are determined almost solely by the quest for ratings and commercial profit. It also forces entertainment values onto the genre.

Carla Johnston describes the commercial broadcast environment as being,

about finding the lowest-common-denominator programs that can appeal to the most people who might buy products based on the statistical sample selected by the Nielsen ratings service. That’s the simplistic formula in which everyone is trapped – the public, the broadcasters, and the advertisers. All must adhere to “paint by numbers programming” – to demonstrate their blind faith in a simple, quick profit formula (Johnston, 2000).

If girls in bikinis or “Jackass” style characters make people watch sitcoms and beer commercials, then why wouldn’t they work for natural history as well?

Filmmaking has inherent ties to money, in both the processes of creation and distribution. Within the current media structure, one of the primary forces behind this money is advertising. CNN's show *Capitol Gang* was asked by advertisers to run through a mock program so that they could evaluate the content. They were given the message that broadcast professionals know instinctively; the program's content would be closely monitored. Robin Andersen, author of *Consumer Culture and Television Programming* writes that,

Public-affairs directors (for television networks) are made keenly aware that advertisers are paying close attention to their programming, and that to contradict corporate sponsors or their advertising messages would have a negative impact on the station and by extension, their jobs. Cable programming is not exempt from these pressures (Anderson, 1995).

A clear example of broadcasters filtering content according to advertisers' desires occurred when NBC invited Coca-Cola to preview a documentary about agriculture that exposed how Coca-Cola exploited migrant agricultural workers and was complicit with Coke's request to cut several segments from the documentary (McMenamin, 1996). It would be unrealistic to expect complete independence from commercial interests, however, having SNH filmmaking so intimately tied to commercial influence poses a number of threats to its integrity. Underrepresentation of viewpoints that aren't profitable is especially dangerous for documentaries because most people assume them to be largely objective and have a hard time identifying bias or censorship. With some material, an audience can detect bias or make their own judgment based on previous exposure to a given topic, but with SNH, viewers often have little or no prior or personal experience with the

subject matter. By customizing their treatment of SNH to advertisers' needs, broadcasters equip viewers to think about science, the environment and technology in limited and misleading ways.

In 1995 a worker in the tobacco industry provided evidence that the industry knew long ago about the dangers of smoking (McMenamin, 1996). Although some networks covered the story, others chose not to. Many companies, such as those in the tobacco industry, have wide-ranging holdings that give them a lot of power as advertisers. Phillip Morris, for example, is not just a tobacco company but also controls food and insurance companies as well. An advertising boycott by some of these companies could pose a serious financial problem for a network (McMenamin 1996). CBS chose not to air the story and Mike Wallace, journalist for CBS on *Sixty Minutes* decried their decision saying, "It was the first time that I really felt let down by my company. It became so obvious that we were simply dead wrong, that we were caving in" (Johnston, 2000).

But it wasn't the first time and CBS wasn't the first one to cave in. Films dealing with topics such as the medical sciences, toxicology, and environmental and ecological issues, can and often do run counter to the interests of powerful companies like Coca-Cola or Phillip Morris. The clear priority of commercial interests over objectivity, diversity and accurate information makes the broadcast and mainstream media environment hostile to programs dealing with these sorts of issues.

SNH films are additionally affected by commercial broadcast criteria because the primacy of broadcast in distribution of visual media affects viewer expectations and viewing criteria. As a former senior VP and executive producer at Discovery Communications Inc. (DCI), Chris Hawes said, “There is not a documentary producer on the planet who has not already been affected by Discovery” (Fry, 1999). His claim refers to the way in which the magnitude of Discovery’s distribution (the world’s largest broadcaster of non-fiction programming with 1.2 billion subscribers) changed public conceptions of SNH film and forced a corresponding change in the paradigms of filmmakers, producers and other broadcasters.

Even if commercial broadcast were not the dominant venue, SNH film would be subject to much of the same criteria because the hold of the corporations that control the mainstream media environment is so complete; the companies that control broadcast also control, both directly and indirectly, many of the other outlets. Movie studios moved into syndication in the 80’s and now control about 75 percent of primetime network series (Denney, 1993). Studios are also involved in continuing battles, with varying degrees of success, to get a piece of the cable distribution pie (Denny, 1993). When the movie industry had a lot to gain by defeating the cable TV regulation bill, it was a top special interest contributor to the Clinton campaign. Sony Corp. gave more than \$200,000, MCA contributed \$150,000, Walt Disney Studios gave more than \$120,000 and Twentieth Century Fox gave \$50,000 (Denny 1993). Even today as documentary films are starting to enjoy some success in

alternative venues such as theatrical release, they are subject to the criteria of the same media giants.

As Carla Brooks Johnston wrote, “The media is the megaphone for announcing what is reality in our culture, and for suggesting how to interpret it” (Johnston, 2000). A close look at the corporate ownership structure of the media illustrates why SNH films are forced to carry out their role as informants about the realities around us, within the context and within the restrictions of the larger media structures.¹ The media mega-corporations that control virtually every media outlet in the country also control the vast majority of resources available to SNH films. The wealth of channels and apparent glut of options on the television belies the paucity of sources – just a handful of corporate superpowers control the content.

A succession of media mergers took place in the 80’s. From Capitol Cities Communications’ union with ABC to the Time/Warner merger, each was progressively larger, setting one historical precedent after another. At present, less than twenty-four corporations control a vast industry – a true case of corporate monopoly (Andersen, 1995).

Robin Andersen wrote that only ten years ago. Today, five giants control that seemingly grand diversity of channels – Time Warner, Disney, Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation, General Electric, and Viacom. Their sway is even greater considering that they also rule other sectors of the TV business and the greater media complex. Recent payoff mergers and new technologies have extended the reach of visual media conglomerates to include not just broadcast, but also satellites, telephones, movies and theatres, computers, and the Internet. These corporations are few in number, vertically integrated, and function as a cartel to control throughout

the spectrum of media giving us a narrow and limited perspective or, as New York University's media studies professor Mark Crispin Miller puts it, "All Garbage, All The Time" (Miller, 1998).

THE CORPORATE SLANT

The common defense that media corporations make for their decisions to broadcast non-controversial, non-substantive, eye-candy type programming is that the public wants it. They argue that this sort of content gets the ratings and that they are merely responding to viewer preferences. At least this is the argument they used to make. The veil of responding to the public has largely been dropped. The argument that broadcasters are just passive mirrors of public demand contends that broadcasters and media have no role in helping to shape and create audience (consumer) appetites, a contention that is weakened considerably by the fact that advertisers and commercial sponsors spend billions every year on television ads with the intent of doing exactly that.

The Nielsen ratings system forms the basis of broadcasters' contention that they are merely responding to the numbers. The broadcast industry has yet to agree on a better alternative but the Nielsen ratings have long been known to be imperfect. Writer and producer Nat Segaloff talks about the fact that Nielsen ratings can give an idea of what sort of numbers certain show have drawn but that it's hard to pin down what this indicates (Johnston, 2000). For example, ratings can't tell you what made those shows popular. He maintains that a lot of other factors affect what programs get aired. "We see a lot of 'reality based' shows (like *When Animals Attack*) not only because they attract voyeuristic viewers, but because they're cheaper to produce" (Johnston, 2000). Janet Hess, Executive Producer for *Nature* on PBS said

during a panel discussion at the International Wildlife Film Festival that, “No one in the industry really knows what viewers want to see. We’re all just guessing.”²

Broadcasters’ contention that their programming is a passive reflection of viewers’ preferences ignores another possible explanation that I believe is a more useful model for explaining editorial decisions in the broadcast environment. I would suggest that programming that is compliant with a conservative, pro-industry, anti-regulation outlook and agenda is ultimately the most lucrative both for media corporations and for their corporate sponsors. An examination of broadcast content makes it hard for broadcasters to argue that audience preference, rather than subservience to a conservative agenda, either their own or that of a company or industry that influences their profits, is the basis of their editorial decisions.

An example from print media provides evidence of the predominantly conservative slant of the mainstream media concerning SNH issues. Critics of industry science began using the phrase “junk science” to refer to the many corporate abuses of science and the consistent difference in results between industry-sponsored science and independent researchers in the same field. “From 1996 through September 1998, 258 articles in mainstream newspapers used the phrase “junk science”; but only twenty-one, or 8%, used it to refer to corporate abuses of science, whereas 160, or 62%, applied it to science used by environmentalists, other corporate critics, or tort lawyers suing corporations” (Herman and Chomsky, 2002). The fact that this term originally came about to describe the often less than rigorous quality of corporate funded science but has been turned around by the press and applied nearly

eight times more frequently to critics of corporate science, seems to be a good indicator of whose corner the media are in when it comes to science issues.

Media coverage of events of significant importance as opposed to isolated or less significant ones make better examples for arguing for a pervasive media bias because it gives us the opportunity to look at the treatment of a given issue by the media across the board.

A perfect example is the media's treatment of massive and worldwide WTO protests. Global opposition to the actions of the WTO, World Bank and IMF (which generally benefit and are supported by corporate interests) led to mass protests at the WTO conference in Seattle in 1999 and again in Washington D.C. in 2000. Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky note that the, "media coverage of these events was derisive and hostile to the protesters and almost uniformly failed to deal with the substantive issues that drove the protests" (Herman and Chomsky, 2002). In its eighty-seven page report, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) writes that, "demonstrators were overwhelmingly peaceful. Not so the police." The ACLU claimed that the police reaction was characterized by "draconian" violations of civil liberties, including widespread use of "chemical weapons, rubber bullets and clubs against peaceful protesters and bystanders alike" (Herman and Chomsky, 2002). NBC, ABC, CBS, CNN, *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post* all ignored the release of the ACLU's findings, which ran counter to their own uniformly pro-police and anti-protester line (Herman and Chomsky, 2002). In addition, there was no ongoing live coverage of the protests on any of the three major networks

including C-SPAN and nothing on the big four networks: CBS, NBC, ABC, and FOX (Street, 2003). Robert McChesney, communications professor and author of eight books on media and politics writes that,

The global commercial-media system is radical in that it will respect no tradition or custom, on balance, if it stands in the way of profits. But ultimately it is politically conservative, because the media giants are significant beneficiaries of the current social structure around the world, and any upheaval in property or social relations – particularly to the extent that it reduces the power of business – is not in their interest (McChesney 1999).

Discussing the relationship of the big media corporations to politics may seem to be wandering astray. However, it is important to try to explain how and why this conservative agenda may have come to be. One explanation is that the virtual absence of measures in place to prevent back-scratching between the government and the media has led to a mutually beneficial agenda and a consolidated ability to impose this agenda on media content, including SNH film.

A free press or separation of government and the media, is axiomatic in democracy. This separation is one of the principal defining factors of democratic governance precisely because of how attractive media control is to governments and vice versa and the threat that a breakdown of this separation poses to the flow of accurate information. The media lobby has enormous power in Washington in part because of its control of not just some but *all* of the mainstream media outlets and the media's increasing importance to candidates at election time. Today, politicians rely on quality access to the media to gain and retain power. In the last twenty-four years, political advertising on television has increased from \$90 million to over \$1-

billion (Saunders and Clarke, 2004). The media conglomerates on the other hand need the politicians in power who will ensure pro-corporate and anti-regulatory legislation.

The evidence for a lack of separation between the government and the media is compelling. In June of 1996 Louisiana Republican senator Trent Lott and House Speaker Newt Gingrich quietly sealed a deal that gave private broadcasters, free of charge, a chunk of public digital broadcast spectrum valued at \$70 billion (Public Interest, 1998). This “spectrum” is the actual transmission medium that allows digital visual content to be broadcast. The debate over this “digital TV auction” had been going for two years and as the name implies, the original plan involved auctioning off this public spectrum to private companies. Many critics of the deal pointed out that House Speaker Newt Gingrich, who signed the bill directing the giveaway, seemed to have been co-opted by the industry, as his book deal with HarperCollins (owned by Rupert Murdoch) would seem to support. The giveaway was also due in part to pressure from the industry’s most powerful lobby, the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB). NAB launched a \$9.5 million campaign lobbying on behalf of the broadcasters (Rowse, 1998). Interestingly, Edward O. Fritts, the president of NAB, is a close friend and college classmate of Trent Lott (Rowse, 1998).

Private broadcasters were given a huge amount of immensely valuable digital spectrum for absolutely nothing and for no apparent reason – unless we consider politicians’ need for media favors as a reason. Congress did however, stand to

benefit from this deal apart from just appeasing broadcasters. After giving away all of this public spectrum, Congress then threatened to cut the FCCs (Federal Communications Commission) funding if it pursued the public service oriented idea of requiring broadcasters to use part of it to offer free TV time to political candidates. Why? Because this free airtime would be much more useful to challengers than the incumbents that are already entrenched in the system and making the regulations.

Politicians' reliance on expensive political advertisements to communicate with the public poses many problems. The need for sources of huge amounts of money to fund increasingly expensive campaigns empowers special interests. In turn, many of the biggest contributors and most powerful special interests are the media corporations themselves (Center for Responsive Politics, 2004). GE, for example, which owns NBC, spent over \$45 million dollars on lobbying in 2003 alone. GE is also a contractor for the defense department and has an annual revenue of \$134.2 billion, much of which comes from its government contracts in Iraq (Saunders and Clarke, 2004). An easy solution to this problem of the growing interdependence of the government and special interests such as media conglomerates, is to make broadcasters provide free airtime for political candidates. This policy would make political campaigns democratic rather than reliant on favors for special interests. This solution seems reasonable, even inevitable, considering that the commercial broadcast networks receive their licenses from the government for free in exchange for "serving the public interest." However, Congress continues to block initiatives

which would require broadcasters to use airwaves that legally belong to the public, to provide candidates with free airtime and help democracy function properly; this is apparently because it would upset the system of mutually beneficial favors between politicians and big money interests. As Nicholas Johnson, former FCC and maritime commissioner said,

You can't get campaign finance reform through Congress because Congress is controlled by the very same big money that you're trying to get them to forgo and they are not particularly enthusiastic about that (Johnston, 2000).

These mutual favors between the media and the government occur with little or no coverage from not only television broadcasters, but by the print media as well.

“A data search for “digital TV auction” drew no hits on any of the broadcast networks during a time when CNN ran 31 stories in 16 months” (Rowse, 1998).

Thirty-one stories by CNN while the four major networks (CBS, NBC, ABC, and FOX) aired nothing is an imbalance that would seem to have some motivation, but Arthur Rowse of the *Washington Monthly* reported that, “inquiries by the *Washington Monthly* to the network chiefs at ABC, CBS, and NBC about the lack of coverage of telecom issues brought only silence (Rowse, 1998). The lack of coverage, across all types of media, might be explained by many print media publishers' stakes in radio and TV, or more accurately, they're often owned by the same corporations. The New York Times' Broadcast Group, for example, comprises eight television stations and two radio stations. The Washington Post Corporation owns six TV stations and Gannett, the owner of some ninety-three newspapers

nationwide, including USA Today, operates twenty television stations. T.V. giant Time Warner is also the largest magazine publisher in the world.

The power that this collusion gives special interests (big industry and media lobbies) over politics and economics has a profound effect on media content and results in a consistent bias and agenda that can be characterized as conservative, pro-industry, and anti-regulation. There is a wealth of examples of how this bias and agenda are manifested in the media giants' treatment of SNH film. One of the starkest examples brings us back to GE. The *Multinational Monitor* listed GE on their list of the top ten worst corporations on the planet (based on unethical or fraudulent activity and overall harm to the planet and its inhabitants) in 1988, 1991, 1992, and again in 1994. GE owns a host of channels that deal with SNH, including A&E, the History Channel, Bravo (the arts and film cable network), E!, and NBC. GE, understandably, has never aired any substantial coverage on any of its channels, regarding its massive PCB-related environmental liability and actions against it by the government (Anderson, 1995). GE is a major force in all sorts of technology and industry development and as such, it is unlikely that NBC or any of their other channels would be open to programming that seeks to inform the public about environmental threats or potential perils of technologies. GE is also the largest weapons contractor in the world and has a willingness to control program content that is well-documented. The company has pulled or censored numerous programs and news stories that were deemed harmful to their business interests (Anderson, 1995). Conversely, they have been proactive in coming up with content that feeds

their agenda. “NBC stirred controversy when it aired a feature documentary favorable to nuclear power shortly after GE purchased the network. Viewers were not informed that NBC was owned by GE, a leader in the nuclear industry” (Anderson, 1995). Nor were they informed that GE was the manufacturer of a new machine used to detect breast cancer, which was featured three nights in a row on NBC Nightly News. A total of fourteen minutes, or half of one newscast, was devoted to this “story.” Not surprisingly, neither CBS nor ABC reported on the story (Anderson, 1995). The possibility of public deception seems high when such a huge weapons and technology development company has the ability to regulate public perceptions of issues tied to its main business by controlling content on one of the major broadcast networks in the country.

GE is one example of what has become the dominant paradigm in the mass media. Early in 2004, leading up to the election, CBS dumped a series of shows that were critical of Ronald Reagan. On *NOW with Bill Moyers*, host David Brancaccio and Bill Moyers discussed the high likelihood that CBS, owned by Viacom, dropped the shows because they didn’t want to offend the conservative powers in Washington (*NOW*, 2004). It is noteworthy that Viacom dropped the series shortly before the House Majority Leader ruled to roll back the FCC television broadcast restrictions that limited the amount of television stations one corporation could own. The two sole beneficiaries of this rollback were Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation and Viacom (*NOW*, 2004). The rule was protested by almost a million citizens and also defeated in a 55 to 40 Senate vote, but was passed anyway behind closed doors.

Despite all the protest House Majority Leader Tom Delay refused to allow a House vote on the ruling. Republican congressman Jim Leach of Iowa said, regarding the ruling, “I know of no circumstance more clear-cut of a special interest intervention – against the public interest, than this one” (*NOW*, 2004).

The effects of the relationship between politicians and industry and media lobbies are not always so direct or immediately apparent. The pervasive influence of these power structures means that the effects they have are often indirect and manifest themselves in subtle ways. Disney’s refusal to release *Fahrenheit 9/11*, which it owned through its subsidiary Miramax, is a good example of how dominant political and economic forces can influence the media in indirect ways. Miramax invested a substantial amount of money in making a movie with high production value that was guaranteed to appeal to a very large part of the movie audience. However, when Disney saw how compelling the movie was, they refused to show it. The seemingly obvious explanation is that it didn’t conform to their political ideology or they thought it would hurt Bush. This may in fact be the case but Michael Eisner, CEO of The Walt Disney Co. proclaimed a different reason for his decision that is more indicative of the indirect ways in which biases are translated into the media. He objected to the film not because of its politics but because he felt the release of the film might jeopardize Disney’s economic interests in Florida where the governor happens to be the brother of the President of the United States (Barsamian, 2005). When media corporations have ownership on such a massive

scale, their decisions may reflect indirect impacts on other unrelated properties that they have or even properties that their sponsors or politicians have.

Similarly, broadcasters' decisions can be indirectly influenced by their interlocking directorates. For example, media corporations share members of their board of directors with other large corporations including banks, investment companies, oil companies, health care and pharmaceutical companies and technology companies (FAIR, 2001).

As we learn more and more about our planet, scientists and the public alike are giving increasing attention to the health of our oceans. The media's treatment of SNH programming that deals with this controversial subject provides us with an opportunity to look more closely at the complex ways in which corporate agendas ultimately affect SNH film. In the past several years, Discovery Communications Inc. (DCI) has failed to air two important films about threats to our oceans. One of these was the ninth episode of the Emmy Award winning Discovery/BBC co-production, *Blue Planet*. Drawing on the BBC's vast archive of natural history footage and a massive budget, this nine part series was very successful (leading to a follow-up theatrical release) both in Europe and in the United States. However, when DCI got the film for U.S. distribution it refused to air the ninth episode, the one that dealt with the imperiled state of the world's oceans. Even though nearly the entire series focused on the visual spectacle of the world's oceans and lacked any substantive narration or information about the issues surrounding them, DCI chose to censor the relatively small part of the film that highlighted the effects human beings

are having on the world's oceans. DCI could have opted not to show the last episode for many reasons and there is no proof that its reason had anything to do with the conservative or pro-industry agenda that maximizes corporate profit. A likely explanation by DCI might be that it did not want to turn off viewers or advertisers with a lecture about lifestyle choices and their environmental impacts or with pedantic doomsday warnings. Or perhaps the DCI executives would echo the words of NBC network commercial clearance manager, Richard Gitter when he refused to air an anti-timber industry spot because it was, "inimical to our legitimate business interests" (Lasn, 2000). Whatever the case may be, the fact that the one episode DCI chose not to air, out of a well-made and effective nine part series, happened to be the only one that was potentially off-putting to anyone, suggests that DCI's decision was based on the perceived threat that the show posed to its business interests rather than on objections to program quality, lack of programming space, or other such concerns.

A political and economic environment that favors the interests of powerful and wealthy industries has far-reaching consequences and implications, many of which come to bear, either directly or indirectly, on broadcasters. The fact that the effects of this political and economic environment on broadcast and SNH film are often indirect and hard to trace or prove is not a good enough reason to deny that these effects exist. On the contrary, the likelihood of systemic obstacles to balanced representations of SNH film mandate further inquiry into the potential existence of such obstacles and their mechanisms. If hard hitting environmental stories are

conspicuously absent from DCI's many channels, there is likely an identifiable motivation for that trend. Nobody has ever proven that viewers will not watch environmental issues programs but it is safe to say that balanced treatment of many environmental issues will likely cost broadcasters industry advertising dollars. The fact that deference to advertisers' sensibilities is the most logical explanation for a lack of critical environmental programming, is worth noting. Broadcasters' ultimate dependence on the advertising dollars of powerful companies and industries lends itself to a broadcast environment that generally avoids controversy and is compliant with the outlook of those companies and industries.

In 2001 the BBC produced a film called *Warnings from the Wild: The Price of Salmon*, that explored the controversies surrounding the salmon farming industry. Salmon farming is a lucrative industry but has several severe effects on both wild salmon and human health. The BBC nearly pulled the show the day before it was to air due to protests and threats by the industry but decided, in the end, to go ahead with the program. DCI however, opted not to show the program. Why, DCI might ask, would it show a program that is controversial and likely to turn off some percentage of viewers or commercial sponsors when it can show uncontroversial programming that will pacify viewers and advertisers alike? Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky offer an explanation in their book, *Manufacturing Consent*,

Our belief, based on many years of study of the workings of the media, [is that] they serve to mobilize support for the special interests that dominate the state and private activity and that their choices, emphases, and omissions can often best be understood...by analyzing them in such terms" (Herman, 2002).

The C.E.O. of CBS confirmed, “We are here to serve advertisers. That is our *raison d’etre*” (Advertising Age, February 3, 1997). Echoing this sentiment, Michael Eisner, CEO of The Walt Disney Co., said in a private memo, “We have no obligation to make history. We have no obligation to make art. We have no obligation to make a statement. To make money is our only objective” (Eisner). These media corporations are legitimate businesses but their frequent claim that their only obligation is to run a profitable business misses the mark. Maintaining that their possession and use of such an enormously important mode of communication in our society comes with no responsibility other than to turn a profit, is unethical and in defiance of the fact that they get the broadcast licenses from the federal government for free, provided they “serve the public interest.” DCI, like many other U.S. media corporations, apparently believes in its inherent right to ignore its role as a critical source of balanced information, in its pursuit of profit.

In light of many broadcasters’ views of their rights and obligations, and the cutthroat political and economic environment in which they operate, it is not likely that the public is going to see many programs about science or environmental issues that negatively affect the holding corporations’ business interests. Most of the big media corporations have a stake in preserving the pro-industry, anti-regulation policies that lie at the heart of so many SNH issues. We shouldn’t expect to see many shows that challenge that agenda on the broadcast, cable or satellite channels nor in the film studios they control – and we don’t.

CONCLUSION

The Supreme Court has stated that the First Amendment, “rests on the assumption that the widest dissemination of information from diverse and antagonistic sources is essential to the welfare of the public” (Associated Press v. U.S., 1945). “Information from diverse and antagonistic sources” is critical for SNH films and concentration of media ownership serves to limit this diversity of programming. Lack of diversity is the single biggest problem that the larger media environment poses for SNH film. The problem does not lie entirely with the commercial nature of the media. With all its faults, it is still probably the best economic model there is for media distribution. An extreme concentration of control can cripple the diversity of programming and magnify the negative aspects of commercial and corporate media agendas. As Ben Bagdikian, author of *The Media Monopoly*, points out,

In the end, no small group, certainly no group with as much uniformity of outlook and as concentrated in power as the current media corporations, can be sufficiently open and flexible to reflect the full richness and variety of society’s needs. ...The answer is not elimination of private enterprise in the media, but the opposite. It is the restoration of genuine competition and diversity (Bagdikian, 2000).

The lack of diversity in the current media environment means that the economic censorship patterns discussed in this paper are less likely to be balanced out by a competitive market of “diverse and antagonistic sources.”

National Geographic and Discovery are both good examples of how the diversity of SNH film might suffer due to concentrated media ownership. The

National Geographic channel and the host of channels that comprise DCI are huge forces in SNH film and are largely responsible for the public's familiarity with it. Public television has played an important role as well but has only a fraction of the distribution that the commercial networks have. The BBC has also been influential but its U.S. programming is distributed by DCI and so, for American viewers, is subject to DCI's criteria. Whether we're talking about television broadcast, the film festival circuit, or theatrical release, National Geographic and Discovery have had a huge role in shaping the *de facto* standard of natural history film. Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation owns National Geographic and DCI relies on Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation as its single largest distributor (Balnaves, 2001). Because of the monopolistic nature of the media, both of these two pillars of SNH film have come to be distributed by an overtly right-wing corporation. There is no way to prove that this imparts a bias to, or limits the diversity of the programming that is selected. The intent of my argument is to point out the high potential for ideological or economic filtering of content, the massive scale on which it would be played out, and the lack of any method to measure or prevent it given the current laws and regulations.

To restore diversity and vitality to SNH programming we need to free up the media from an unrestricted commercial system that allows media monopolies and their business formulas to dictate the content. And while it is beyond the purview of this paper to address potential solutions, my arguments in this paper suggest the general path this restructuring would need to follow. Ideally, change in our media environment should happen internally through policy that restructures and regulates

companies that bring us visual media, and externally, through increased public support and demand for films from independent and diverse sources.

Predictions abound today that advances in Internet and other distribution technologies will accomplish this restructuring and loosen the grip of corporate control on the media. In particular people have predicted that distribution will soon fragment into lots of niche markets and a wide range of special interest programs available in an “on demand” format. People also point to the new distribution options the Internet offers to independent filmmakers. Although there have been some isolated cases of independent films getting significant attention through internet promotion, a film afloat somewhere on the oceanic internet hardly constitutes significant distribution and, while many of these possibilities may be encouraging, it is unlikely that corporations with as much power as the current media conglomerates are going to willingly let the market slide out of their control. Regaining a healthy and balanced media is going to require much more than faith in new technologies.

One important step to free up the media and restore diversity would be to implement stringent anti-trust laws limiting corporate control and ownership. As this paper points out, tighter regulations will be difficult to implement until political candidates’ dependence on media money and commercial media access has been diminished. Free airtime for political candidates is could go a long way toward re-stabilizing a balanced and democratic media.

At the same time we need to put the public airwaves to better use. A significant increase in funding for public television and a better national and local public broadcast system would help immensely, as would a stronger public service code for commercial broadcasters using the public airwaves. Perhaps a system could be devised whereby content is evaluated on the basis of diversity and accuracy of information by independent panels with the power to affect broadcast license renewal.

Creation of a public network for independent films and media would be another invaluable step toward restoring balance. Independent is not synonymous with low production value and a nationally broadcast venue for exceptional independent work might draw significant audiences. Independent film is important for offsetting many of the problems with today's media environment. Independent filmmakers need to find new forms of self-financing to stay afloat in a free-market era dominated by corporate media elephants. They also need to continue to find creative methods of distributing their work to large numbers of people.

We access non-fiction films for information about the world we live in through television. Even as the medium itself and the ways we watch it change, it's likely that the media mega-corporations will be at the forefront, helping to dictate how the medium evolves. The public must be fierce in supporting independent media and pressuring politicians and private companies to use public airwaves in the public interest. Visual media has become the life-blood of our country and needs to reflect the diversity of views and information that make America what it is. SNH

films play an important role in informing us as consumers and enabling us as a democracy and we depend on them to provide us with the understanding we need of issues critical to democratically steering global politics and economics. We need to get to a place where the public has ample access to informative films about environmental and technological issues - a place where a diverse group of SNH filmmakers and broadcasters alike would be able to serve the people instead of just doing business.

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APPENDIX A

NOTES

NOTES

¹ In the early 90's Viacom took over Paramount. The resulting conglomerate then controlled not just Paramount's 50,000 films, but also Simon & Schuster's 300,000 book titles, Blockbuster's video and music stores, the Nickelodeon and MTV cable networks, as well as theme parks, television and radio stations and cinema chains (Balnaves 2001). AOL Time Warner owns cable television systems, filmed entertainment, television programming, videos, cinema chains and vast internet services. Among its holdings are Turner Broadcasting System, CNN News Group, Cinemax, HBO, Time Warner Digital Cable, Warner Bros. and New Line Cinema, multiplex theatre systems in 12 countries, ICQ communication server, Moviefone, AOL TV, and HBO not to mention countless music and publishing holdings (Balnaves 2001). Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation owns Fox Broadcasting, America's most watched network among young adults. They also own DirectTV and distribute everything from the various Discovery Channels to the BBC, HBO and ESPN. They have the nation's largest digital television distribution system carrying every major television network. To say anything about science and natural history films outside of just News Corporation alone, much less the broader media environment is a serious mistake. News Corporation owns a host of channels that act as major outlets for science and natural history film including Fox Movie Channel (which increasingly deals with documentaries), its numerous sports channels that are also hot destinations for programming dealing with a variety of topics related to health and human performance, medicine, and technology. The programming on the FX channel is based on "Super Size Me," one of the most successful theatrical releases of a documentary. SpeedTV deals only with automotive themes from racing to vehicle technology. News Corporation has the largest distribution system available to networks like the Discovery channel and so have significant influence on them and the content they carry. A stunning example of this content control occurred when Rupert Murdoch threw the BBC news off of his STAR satellite northern tier coverage of Asia (Johnston, 2000). This is a perfect example of how companies are able to filter out ideas that they don't want aired, or that their clients do not want aired. News Corporation has also recently launched *DirectTV Goes To School*, which beams "high quality" educational programs into classrooms. These are just the holdings that directly impact the field of SNH film but News Corporation's diverse holdings make it the most vertically integrated media empire on the planet and give it a presence and power to impose its will, in any area, that is hard to ignore.

² Quoted during a panel discussion about the ethics of wildlife filmmaking at the International Wildlife Film Festival in Missoula, MT on April, 23rd of 2004.