

**Radio Sucks! or**  
**Is What Capitalism Wants, Really What Democracy Needs?**

Remarks  
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### **Two minute remarks**

I'm Chuck Tarver Station Manager of WVUD at the University of Delaware. I also teach a communications course in radio programming and production and serve on the Prometheus Radio Board.

In the 25 plus years that I have been involved with radio, I've never heard more dissatisfaction with the medium. The phrase I hear over and over is "radio sucks!" I hear it from my kids, I hear it from my students, I hear it from friends.

So I put radio sucks in quotes into the Google search engine and in zero point eighteen seconds got 13,000 entries. In fairness I entered other terms along with sucks into the search engine. Radio was far and away the winner on the Google "suck-o-meter." You'll be pleased to know radio sucks even more than France. Radio 13,000 France a mere 2,030.

In 1994, I completed a master's thesis on The Effects of Deregulation on Black Radio Ownership. During the course of research, I compiled tons of data only to be told by my advisor Dr. Nancy Signorielli, an Annenberg alum, that my data needed a supporting theory. She told me that when I found the right theory, it would not only have the power to explain but also the power to predict.

The theory I found stated two major consequences of relying upon marketplace forces:

First the range of material available will tend to decline as market forces exclude all but the commercially successful.

The second general consequence is that this evolutionary process is not random, but systematically excludes those voices lacking economic power or resources. This process of deletion is by no means random however. On the contrary, the underlying logic of cost operates systematically, consolidating the position of groups already established in the main mass-media markets and excluding those groups who lack the capital base required for successful entry.

Now before you get excited, its proponents were Murdock and Golding, known communists. So I figured I'd get my degree but realized my research would go absolutely nowhere.

Yet, I'm amazed at just how well the theory explains what happened post 1996 and how well it predicts what we could face should the FCC make the wrong decisions during its ownership review.

It's important that we tell the FCC they are dealing with communities and citizens and not markets and consumers. The quality of our media and the future of our democracy are at stake.

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I did a Google search with the words “radio sucks” in quotes and in zero point 18 seconds I received 13,000 entries, many of which had “Clear Channel” listed next to them.

For fairness, I also did TV sucks, 4,370 cases; television sucks, 708; Walmart, 461; McDonald’s, 228; American Idol, 58; Survivor, 1,680; AOL 8,900. I also entered the name of the current president, a recent past president and a well-known senator from the state of New York. All received a score far lower than radio. Even France sucks less than radio; Radio 13,000, France 2,030.

So on the Google “suck-o-meter,” radio is the clear winner or put another way, nothing sucks more than radio.

I teach a class in Radio Programming and Production at the University of Delaware. The first day of class, I always get my class talking. I ask them what they think of radio. Invariably, several of them will say at once, “radio sucks!” When I ask them, well then, why are you here? They say, they somehow feel connected to radio. It’s an important means of expression and of keeping the community informed and entertained. They also talk about how important it is for communities to have a “voice” and how people feel powerless without one. The class generally comes to the consensus that they love radio but that radio sucks!

I had a similar experience this past Thanksgiving 2002 with two of my sons. My oldest son attends college in Baltimore. I took my middle son along with me to pick him up the Wednesday before Thanksgiving. On the way down, my middle son and I traveled along I-95 in heavy traffic. I do not have a CD or cassette player in my car. As we traveled, my middle son was up and down the dial looking for something to listen to. Every time he'd happen on a song he'd heard before, or heard too much or absolutely could not stand or yet another commercial stop set, he would sigh in that way that teenagers do and hit the scan button again.

On the way back, we got off I-95 and onto US route 40. We were at a point on route 40 where we could receive stations from Baltimore, Philadelphia, Wilmington and Washington, DC. My oldest son was controlling the radio then and knows most of the stations playing the kind of music they like. He too was getting frustrated running into the same songs over and over and tons of commercials. Finally, my middle son yells out from the back seat, "RADIO SUCKS!"

Why radio? Perhaps because many people have a long close personal relationship with the medium. Radio is a companion and when a companion changes you get more upset than if something you really don't care much about changes. People have noticed the changes since the Telecommunications Act of 1996. To say otherwise is to completely miss the point. Yet, that is exactly what the FCC is doing. If it makes the wrong decision during the ownership review, the FCC runs the risk of disenfranchising Americans from "all media."

A major problem is the way in which the review is framed. The ownership review is proceeding with the “Marketplace” as its term of reference. As a result all arguments, even those against changing the rules and lifting the caps, must meet standards that clearly favor the marketplace.

Thus we have Chairman Powell saying, “This is a rule-making that will be driven by evidence and not just intuition,” “...if the commission can’t justify a media ownership restriction, the rule will go away.” Thus we have the DC Circuit Court rejecting restrictions on the numbers of TV stations one company can own “in a market.” We even have Commissioner Copps who champions community involvement framing his descent by referring to citizens as consumers and communities as markets.

The courts and the FCC are using standards sent to them by Congress, standards that clearly favor capitalism over democracy. Just the fact that the Senate hearings were held by the “Commerce” committee further shapes the debate.

Capitalism and Democracy, aren’t the same thing. Even though most people in this country have been led to believe that they are. So while it is clear that changing the rules and lifting the caps is something that capitalism wants. No one is taking the next step and asking the question, “Is what capitalism wants, really what democracy needs?”

Markets are not communities. The two need different things in order to thrive and be healthy.

Those needs are often in conflict. In the case of media ownership, they are in conflict.

The issue needs to be re-framed from the perspective of our democratic concerns. This is not an issue of media marketplaces. It is a quality of life issue. For example, while in an economic sense, Philadelphia is a marketplace, in a democratic sense, it is a collection of communities, made up of families and individuals. From a democratic perspective we see that this is a nation of people (citizens), families, villages, towns, cities, counties, and states. We are more than just consumers who compose a marketplace.

In order to have a decent quality of life citizens in a democracy need information and they need to have a voice. People are more than just the aggregate that media corporations need to sell to advertisers, so that they can make a profit.

Just to back track a minute and frame the argument that capitalism and democracy are not one and the same and can actually be in conflict. In a 1997 Boston Globe op-ed piece, Lester C. Thurow professor of management and economics at the MIT Sloan School of Management, uses the opening of his article to frame this very argument. He writes, “One nation, divisible. As government’s role recedes, capitalism and democracy clash.” He goes on to say, “Finding a new way to link democracy and capitalism symbiotically is apt to be the economic and political problem of the next century.”

In 2001, the Global Freedom Institute wrote: “It must remain clear, democracy and capitalism are not one and the same.” They state:

Democracy is a governmental system... Capitalism is an economic system that moves wealth, creates wealth and maintains wealth based on the ingenuity of some and the will of the people to give their wealth to others for those goods, services and ideas. The two are seemingly compatible because they both rely on the people for their force and success.

In his 1997 article Thurow writes:

Democracy believes in radical equality -- one vote per person no matter how smart or dumb, how hard-working or lazy, how well-informed or ignorant. Capitalism believes in radical inequality. In market economies wealth leads to wealth and poverty to poverty since investments in human or physical assets, and hence future income, depend on current income. There are no equalizing feedback mechanisms in capitalism. The economically fit are supposed to drive the economically unfit out of existence. The phrase “survival of the fittest,” in fact, was coined by a 19th-century economist, Herbert Spencer, and borrowed by Charles Darwin to explain evolution. In 19th-century economics starvation had a positive role to play in the economic system.

It’s important to understand these distinctions. In an economic sense, the notion that “radio sucks,” doesn’t mean a thing. The marketplace does not care. Media corporations can still attract large enough audiences to entice advertisers. The marketplace doesn’t care whether you vote, or serve on juries. It doesn’t care whether or not your kids go to school, or the quality of those schools. It doesn’t care whether or not you stay informed or remain ignorant. It doesn't care whether or not artists continue to produce new works or just imitate and recycle what already exists. It doesn’t care whether or not you breathe fresh air or live near toxic waste. As long as you continue to consume, the marketplace is happy.

Your community on the other hand is affected by any and all of those things. It is effected if you don't vote, if your kids don't go to school or if those schools are substandard. The community and



the culture do care if artistic expression is stifled. It is effected if its citizens are ill informed. Your community is harmed if your air and water are polluted. Your community is harmed if radio sucks and yes, the community, does care. Communities will be further harmed if the FCC makes the wrong decisions and “all media” suck.

So just what does an unregulated marketplace do? My 1994 master’s thesis was on The Effect of Deregulation on Black Radio Ownership, prior to the passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996. I collected and analyzed tons of data showing that blacks who owned radio stations generally owned the worst properties. I also compiled information showing how access to capital directly affect radio ownership. My advisor, Dr. Nancy Signorielli, who received her Ph.D. from the Annenberg School for Communication, here at the University of Pennsylvania told me that it was insufficient because it was not based on any theory and therefor just a collection of facts and figures. She advised that if I found the right theory, it would not only have the power to explain, it would have the power to predict.

I finally stumbled upon a theory, political-economic media theory. I’ll briefly outline the theory. It postulates: “that the consequence of relying on market forces is a reduction of independent media sources, a concentration on large markets, risk avoidance and neglect of poorer sectors of the potential audience.”

It goes further stating:

Economics is but one of many levers--perhaps the most powerful--that influence the media. Such control is not always exercised directly, nor does the economic state of media organizations always have an immediate impact on their output.

The theory identifies two major consequences of relying upon marketplace forces. It states:

First the range of material available will tend to decline as market forces exclude all but the commercially successful.

The second general consequence is that this evolutionary process is not random, but systematically excludes those voices lacking economic power or resources. This process of deletion is by no means random however. On the contrary, the underlying logic of cost operates systematically, consolidating the position of groups already established in the main mass-media markets and excluding those groups who lack the capital base required for successful entry.

Now before you get too excited about this theory, let me introduce you to the theorists. They are Murdock and Golding, from the Frankfurt School, known communists. The theory is from work they did in 1977. So after stumbling upon this theory, I said, well at least I'll get my degree but no one will ever pay any attention to my research.

What I find ironic is just how well the theory explained the phenomenon I was examining and how well it explains what happened to radio following the Telecommunications Act of 1996. It shows how consolidation works, how community voices are taken away and how artists are stifled.

What really frightens me is just how well it predicts what could happen if we allow the FCC to obliterate the rules keeping corporate ownership in check.

An ownership review has value but the focus of the review needs to be changed from the use of economic language to one using democratic language. Using the economic language of

marketplaces and consumers, corporations have convinced us that without further consolidation media will cease to be viable.

When we begin using democratic language, we see that media will continue to thrive. Citizens will continue to use media as tools of democracy to build communities without the goal of becoming rich.

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