

# Hands Are Shaky and Knees are Weak? Are Journalists Really Dupes of their Corporate Bosses?

by Tim Groseclose  
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“There are NO liberal media outlets: they are ALL owned by corporations. I can’t even comprehend how you managed to deny that fact in your head.”

That’s what “Heir” wrote in the reader comment section of an article posted on politicalwire.com. “Heir” was responding to “passerby25,” who had written that he or she believes that the media, on the whole, are slightly more liberal than conservative.

The phrase “It’s all corporate media,” has become almost a mantra among the far left. The view behind it is that journalists are nothing more than hired agents of their bosses. Accordingly, their political views are irrelevant to their reporting, and instead, all that matters are the political views of their bosses.

“Heir” is not alone. The following are similar claims by media scholars.

- “You’re only as liberal as the man who owns you.” –Eric Alterman. (This is the title of chapter two of his book *What Liberal Media?*)
- “The press is the hired agent of a moneyed system, set up for no other reason than to tell lies where the interests are concerned.” - Henry Adams, quoted in Robert McChesney’s *The Political Economy of Media*, p. 28.
- “Bush and his propaganda czars knew something the American public had not quite grasped: The American media was little more than a megaphone for those in power.” –Amy Goodman and David Goodman, *Static*, p. 9.
- “[R]ows of news story reviewers back at corporate media headquarters rewrite, soften, or spike news stories from the field that threaten the symbiotics of global news management.” -Peter Phillips, from *The Last Days of Democracy*, -Cohen and Fraser, p. 15.

- “With the exception of Fox, a common charge typically launched from the Right against the MSM [mainstream media] is that it is too ‘liberal.’ This charge is not so much false as it is unintelligible... Corporate logic, which is the logic that largely governs the MSM, is definitely not liberal.” -Cohen and xx Fraser, *The Last Days of Democracy*, p. 58-9.
- “The business executives at the top of the media food chain don’t have formal training in journalism, aren’t driven by the interest in uncovering recalcitrant facts, and hence often lack the appreciation for the editorial integrity of America’s newsrooms. As a result, the political leanings of corporate executives have a greater likelihood of finding their way into the newsrooms than do those of individual journalists, who are generally at the bottom of the corporate food chain. -Cohen and Fraser, *The Last Days of Democracy*, p. 165.
- “Media owners do not hesitate to exercise control over news content. They frequently kill stories they dislike and in other ways inject their own preferences. As a group of investigators reported, ‘The owners and managers of the press determine which person, which facts, which version of the facts and which ideas shall reach the public.’” – Parenti, *Democracy for the Few*, p. 179.
- “More important than the working journalists in shaping news content are the rich conservatives who own and control the major media.” – Parenti, *Democracy for the Few*, p. 182.
- “Other mainstream media, such as CNN, are less partisan in terms of party politics, but uncritically accept most of the [current corporate] regime’s underlying ideological assumptions about the virtues of U.S. Hegemony abroad and corporate power at home, reflecting corporate ownership and beliefs.” - xx.
- “[I]n reality, most journalists have about as much say over what is presented by newspapers and news programs as factory workers and foremen have over what a factory produces.” -Robert Parry (quoted in Robert McChesney’s *The Political Economy of the Media*, p. 58.)

But if you ask the owners and top executives of media companies, they will strongly disagree with the above claims. According to them, even if they wanted to micro-manage their reporters, it would require an extreme amount of time and effort, which they are unable or unwilling to devote. In her memoir, Katherine Graham, the owner and publisher of the Washington Post,

explained the false perception that people have about a publisher's ability to control her reporters.

[President Lyndon Johnson] was growing more and more discomfited with our reporting, especially about Vietnam. ... [H]e used his aides, especially Jack Valenti and Joe Califano, to approach or reproach me. After one call, Jack went back to him and said, "Well, Mr. President, Kay says that she doesn't write these stories and doesn't command the stories to be written," to which Johnson replied, "Well, by God, if I owned a g\*\*damned newspaper, I ought to have some people around me who are going to do what I want. Hell, I'd just as soon have a pack of beagle dogs out there—at least I can train them." When Jack reminded him that he didn't tell his newspeople at the Austin station he owned what to report, the president replied, "I'm not down in Austin. By God, Kay Graham is sitting there in her office. She ought to know what the hell those g\*\*damned reporters are writing."

This is such a classic politician's attitude about a publisher [wrote Graham]. Every politician probably believes publishers sit in their offices doling out orders to reporters about what to write and when. [*Personal History*, pp. 401-2.]

In fairness to the above "corporate media" theorists, they would respond to Katherine Graham with a form of the *reporter-internalization* argument. That is, to control the reporting of their journalists, owners and executives do not need to instruct them how to report. Since they have the power to demote or fire the journalists, and since the journalists don't want to be demoted or fired, the journalists have an incentive to internalize the values and tastes of their superiors. As a result, even though their superiors may never even communicate with them, the journalists report as if their superiors are constantly looking over their shoulder. The end product will be as if the superiors had done the reporting themselves.

I must admit, I consider the latter argument theoretically plausible. There are lots of industries where the internalization argument really is accurate—that is, where employees act as perfect, or near-perfect, agents of their bosses. For instance, although the average McDonalds worker never has a corporate boss looking over his shoulder, he cooks a Big Mac exactly the way that boss would want him to. The same is true of probably any line worker in a factory.

Nevertheless, there is one important reason why the internalization argument might not accurately apply to the news industry. This is that monitoring costs, as reflected in the Katherine Graham quote, might be very large. That is, if you are a corporate boss and you want to control your journalists, then at least occasionally, you have to read their stories. Not only that, as I discuss in chapters 6-8 in *Left Turn*, you have to learn about the

facts, quotes, and other information *that they choose not to report*. Further, as Lyndon Johnson admits, it is also important to be physically near your journalists.

All of these things are costly. An owner or executive might instead conclude, “It’s easier just to allow the reporters to have discretion over their own stories.”

An additional cost of monitoring reporters involves a fact that is obvious once you think about it, but it is rarely mentioned by the “corporate media” theorists. This is that, as the following anecdotes reveal, *journalists dislike being monitored by their corporate bosses*:

- “If you want to see my neck swell and the hair on the back of my neck rise, you just try to tell me how to report the news. When anybody tries to intimidate me into reporting the news their way, my answer is, ‘Get lost.’ I’ve never done it. I’m not going to do it now.” -Dan Rather [p. 32 of Bernard Golberg’s *Bias*]
- “In 1968 during the Democratic convention the delegates were voting on the peace plank. And suddenly, as sometimes happens at conventions, Cronkite and everyone else started using—overusing—a single word to refer to a situation. The word this time was *erosion*, which had obviously replaced *slippage*, the last convention’s word. The vote came to Alabama and Cronkite mentioned that there was an erosion of two votes. He was broadcasting live, and suddenly someone passed him a scribbled note: ‘Tell Walter not to use the word “erosion”!’ Cronkite, without missing a beat in the commentary, answered with his own note: ‘Who says?’ Back came another note: ‘Stanton’ [i.e. Frank Stanton, president of CBS]. Suddenly it was as if there were fire coming out of Cronkite’s nostrils, and even as he continued the delegate count he wrote one more note: ‘I quit.’ So someone handed a note to pass to the brass saying: ‘Walter quits.’ And this was passed back and even as it was being passed back Cronkite was standing up and taking off his headset and reaching for his jacket. It was an electric moment. And suddenly someone was yelling, ‘For God’s sake tell him to get back down there, don’t let him leave. They’re not trying to censor him. They just don’t like the word “erosion.”’ So he sat down, and continued his broadcast. They might mess with him once, but no one messed with Walter Cronkite a second time.” -David Halberstam, *The Powers That Be*, pp. 596-7.

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that the quotes by Rather and Cronkite are representative—that the *typical* journalist has a similar dislike of being monitored. Now imagine that you are a corporate boss, and—consistent with standard economic theories—you are paying your employees just barely

enough to keep them from quitting. This means that if you monitor them more, then you have to pay them more to retain them. Similarly, if you monitored them less, then you could cut their pay and still retain them.

What all this means is that monitoring imposes a cost on your business, *simply because journalists don't like being monitored*. Of course, monitoring also has its benefits—you can make your journalists report in a way that your customers prefer, which can increase your revenue. But it is an empirical question whether those benefits outweigh the costs.

In the remainder of this paper, I provide some *evidence* on the question—not just pie-in-the-sky theorizing reflected by the above set of “corporate media” quotes. The evidence suggests that the benefits do *not* outweigh the costs. That is, although U.S. media bosses may occasionally instruct their journalists how to report, that practice is rare. By and large, individual journalists have wide latitude over their reporting

### **The Strong Version of the Corporate-Media Theory**

To discuss this evidence, I consider two versions of the “corporate media” theory. The first, which I call the *strong corporate media theory*, is that journalists are *perfect* agents of their corporate bosses. This implies that their own political views have *zero* influence on any biases in their reporting, and any bias in their reporting will be determined *completely* by the political views of their bosses.

Although the theory sounds like a straw man, note that many of the above quotes by the media scholars are consistent with the theory.

Despite the quotes, however, I do not believe that anyone, including the authors of the quotes, really believes that the theory is true. The following are just a few examples that reveal how ridiculous the news industry would look if the theory really were true.

**(I)** In 1999, Monster.com ran a television commercial in which children shared their dreams. “When I grow up,” says one child, “I want to file. All day.” A series of other children proclaim: “I want to climb my way up to middle management.” ... “Be replaced on a whim.” ... “I want to have a brown nose.” “Be paid less for the same job.” ... “Forced into early retirement.” Quickly the viewer realizes the cynical theme. The commercial ends with the text, “What did you want to be?”<sup>1</sup>

Now imagine the same commercial applied to journalists. If the very strong theory of corporate media were really true, then future journalists would say, “When I grow up, I want to report in a way that will maximize corporate profits.” ... “Write as if my boss is constantly looking over my shoulder.” ... “Make sure my boss’s cronies look good.” ... “Be the watchdog, not for the people, but the company’s bottom line.”

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<sup>1</sup> See Dan Voelpel, “From Mean Joe to Munchkins, Past Ads a Blast,” February 5, 2006, <http://www.thenewtribune.com/business/columnists/voelpel/story/5506189p-4962525c.html>.

If the strong theory accurately describes the job of “journalist,” why would journalists accept such jobs?

(II) Brian Greene, a professor of physics at Columbia University, hosted a PBS program on “string theory.” In the program he discussed an experiment, which you can try at home—an experiment that demonstrates that the strong force in physics is more powerful than gravity. Greene simply jumped in the air, and when he landed, he noted that he did not fall through the ground. Instead, as he explained, the strong force of the atoms in the ground pushed him in the opposite direction of gravity. Because the strong force is stronger than gravity, he did not fall to the center of the earth.

In a similar spirit, here’s an experiment—relevant to the strong theory of corporate media—that you can try at home. Pick up a newspaper or magazine, and choose a random article. Now read the first few words that appear under the title. Those words, if your article is like most newspaper or magazine articles, is the byline—that is, the person whom the article is “by.”

In contrast, if the very strong theory were true, then there would be no reason for bylines. After all, according to the theory, the journalist is nothing more than the mouthpiece of her corporate boss. Accordingly, the story would hardly differ if another reporter wrote it. Why, therefore, should the reporter’s name be attached to the story?

Inconsistent with the theory, however, newspaper and magazine articles usually have bylines. The only major exceptions are the *Economist* magazine, which has no bylines at all, many wire-service articles, and the unsigned editorials in newspapers, which usually occur on only one page of the newspaper.

Even in television reporting, where time is very scarce—for instance, advertisers may pay hundreds of thousands of dollars for a 30-second commercial—the names of individual reporters are usually announced at the beginning or end of stories that they report. That is, for example, the anchor may say, “Here’s Martha Raddatz at the White House,” or at the end of her segment, the reporter may say, “From the White House, I’m Martha Raddatz.”

Meanwhile, most other industries have nothing similar to a byline. For instance, if you order a Big Mac, you do not find the name of the cook listed on the wrapper. Similarly, despite the claim of Robert Parry in the above set of quotes—factory workers do not stamp their name on the products they make.

(III) Here’s another experiment that you can try at home. On some morning watch MSNBC’s Joe Scarborough, and that evening watch MSNBC’s Rachel Maddow. If you are like me, Scarborough will seem to have a slightly-right-of-center bias, and Maddow will seem to have a far-left bias. Of course, some will disagree with my assessment and say, perhaps, that Maddow is centrist and Scarborough is far-right.

However, *no one*, will judge that their slants are identical. Yet, that’s exactly what the strong theory of corporate media predicts. For similar

reasons, the same theory predicts that CNN's Anderson Cooper and Nancy Grace will report with the same slants. So should Fox News's Sean Hannity and Geraldo Rivera.

The fact that these reporters do not adopt the same slant is forceful evidence that the strong theory of corporate media really isn't true.

(IV) When I interviewed Rebecca Trounson, the *Los Angeles Times* reporter I discussed in chapter 6 of *Left Turn*, I asked her to give me a tour of the newsroom. The reason was that several months before I had toured the newsroom of *Billboard* magazine. During the latter tour I was struck by all the anti- George W. Bush paraphernalia that the reporters had hung by their desks. I wondered if the same would be true of the *Times* newsroom.

It was not. Although my tour was brief and covered only part of the newsroom, I did not see *any* political paraphernalia by reporters' desks. Instead, I saw something even more curious. About every third desk displayed a Xeroxed picture of Dean Baquet, the editor at the *Los Angeles Times* who had been fired, a few weeks before my tour.

The Tribune Company (the owner of the *Los Angeles Times*) had instructed Baquet to layoff several *Times* employees. He refused, and in response the Tribune Company forced him to resign. The pictures that the *Times* journalists had posted were simultaneously a tribute to Baquet and a protest directed towards their bosses at the Tribune Co.

A similar incident occurred at the *Wall Street Journal* when Rupert Murdoch was negotiating to buy the newspaper. During the negotiations, the members of the Bancroft family, who held a controlling stake in the newspaper, were approximately split on whether they wanted to sell the newspaper to Murdoch. One of the most recalcitrant members was Leslie Hill, a former airline pilot. To express their solidarity, several *Journal* reporters posted near their desks the *Journal's* enlarged dot drawing of Bancroft; the drawing contained the caption "I fly with Leslie."<sup>2</sup>

The two incidents are very strange if, as the Strong Theory asserts, journalists are such dutiful agents of their bosses. In contrast, reporters at the *Times* and the *Journal* were metaphorically giving the middle finger to, respectively, their boss and potential future boss. Further, when these incidents occurred, the newspaper industry was in steep decline, and it would be very difficult for any laid-off employees to find another job in journalism.

(V) Many of the proponents of the corporate media theory, including McChesney and Alterman (see quotes above), cite a 2000 Pew Research Center survey as supporting evidence of the theory. For instance, McChesney notes,

[C]orporate management increasingly grinds away at their news divisions to play ball with the commercial needs of the

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Perez-Pena, "Fear, Mixed with some Loathing; Many Reporters and Editors at the Wall Street Journal Fret Over Murdoch's Arrival," *New York Times*, July 19, 2007, p. C1.

parent firm. Over time it has been successful, and those who survive in the new world order of corporate journalism tend to internalize the necessary values. ... The Pew Research Center survey of 300 journalists released in 2000 found that nearly one-half of journalists acknowledged sometimes consciously engaging in self-censorship to serve the commercial interests of their firm or advertisers, and only one-quarter of them state this never happened to their knowledge. (McChesney, 2008, *The Political Economy of Media*, Monthly Review Press, pp. 43-4.)

Here are the relevant details of that survey.<sup>3</sup> Question 12.f asked “How often, if ever, do you think the journalists you know avoid a newsworthy story because the story would be embarrassing or damaging to the financial interests of a news organization’s owners or parent company?” Here is how the journalists responded:

	National Journalists -----	Local Journalists -----
Commonplace	3	11
Sometimes	25	33
Rarely	47	40
Never	25	15

Here are the results for Question 12.g, which asked the same thing, except it substituted “advertisers” for “owners or parent company.”

	National Journalists -----	Local Journalists -----
Commonplace	3	12
Sometimes	16	27
Rarely	51	45
Never	29	15

A careful examination of the two tables reveals that McChesney may be guilty of exaggeration. For instance, if you look at the results from question 12.f, you see that only 28% of national journalists, and 44% of local journalists, say that self-censorship occurs at least sometimes. The average of these two numbers is 36%. The same average from question 12.g is 34%. McChesney calls these two numbers “nearly half.”

But even if we ignore the exaggeration, the tables still show very little support for the strong theory of corporate media. Specifically, if the theory were really true, *all* journalists would say that their self-censorship is not just

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://people-press.org/report/?pageid=220>.

commonplace, it is pandemic. Instead, only 3% of national journalists, and only 12% of local journalists, say that it is commonplace.

But in terms of proving or disproving the “corporate media” theory, possibly the most interesting aspect of the survey is what the above corporate-media theorists never mention about the survey—the results from questions 12.e and 15.

Question 12.e shows that the “financial interests” of a media company has approximately the same influence on journalists as does *peer pressure* from other journalists. The question asks, “How often, if ever, do you think the journalists you know avoid a newsworthy story because the story might be ridiculed or frowned on by other journalists?” Here are the results:

	National Journalists -----	Local Journalists -----
Commonplace	4	7
Sometimes	28	32
Rarely	47	38
Never	19	22

Perhaps more interesting, here are the results when *executives* at media companies were asked the same question.

	National Executives -----	Local Executives -----
Commonplace	10	5
Sometimes	32	33
Rarely	29	40
Never	26	14

Note that 42% of national executives (10+32)—and 38% of local executives (5+33)—said that at least sometimes they avoid newsworthy stories because they worry about ridicule from *journalists*. The average of these two numbers, 40%, is slightly higher than 36%, the similar number (from question 12f) expressing journalists’ worry about the financial interests of their parent company. It is also higher than the similar number, 36%, (also from question 12f) which expresses *executives’* concern about the financial interests of their company. That is, according to the survey, executives worry more about (i) stories that may bring ridicule from journalists, than (ii) stories that may harm their company’s financial interest.

Question 15 asks about journalists’ mistakenly seeing corporate censorship when it really does not exist. The following are its results:

“How often, if ever, do journalists mistakenly think a story is killed or buried because it is embarrassing or damaging to the financial interests of a news organization’s owners or parent company, *when it is actually killed or buried because it is not a good news story?* [my emphasis]”

	National Journalists -----	Local Journalists -----
Commonplace	9	7
Sometimes	50	54
Rarely	33	29
Never	5	6

(V) On May 22, 2003, the *Los Angeles Times* published a front-page article by its reporter Scott Gold. The article noted that the Texas state legislature had approved a law, which required abortion doctors to warn women that an abortion might lead to breast cancer. Many conservatives, including myself, read the article, and thought that it had a strong liberal bias.

But this time it wasn’t just conservatives who thought that. Hours after publication, John Carroll, the editor of the *Times*, emailed the following memo to the section editors of the *Times*.

To: SectionEds  
Subject: Credibility/abortion

I’m concerned about the perception---and the occasional reality---that the Times is a liberal, "politically correct" newspaper. Generally speaking, this is an inaccurate view, but occasionally we prove our critics right. We did so today with the front-page story on the bill in Texas that would require abortion doctors to counsel patients that they may be risking breast cancer.

The apparent bias of the writer and/or the desk reveals itself in the third paragraph, which characterizes such bills in Texas and elsewhere as requiring "so-called counseling of patients." I don't think people on the anti-abortion side would consider it "so-called," a phrase that is loaded with derision.

The story makes a strong case that the link between abortion and breast cancer is widely discounted among researchers, but I wondered as I read it whether somewhere there might exist some credible scientist who believes in it.

Such a person makes no appearance in the story's lengthy passage about the scientific issue. We do quote one of the sponsors of the bill, noting that he "has a professional background in property management." Seldom will you read a cheaper shot than this. Why, if this is germane, wouldn't we point to legislators on the other side who are similarly bereft of scientific credentials?

It is not until the last three paragraphs of the story that we finally surface a professor of biology and endocrinology who believes the abortion/cancer connection is valid. But do we quote him as to why he believes this? No. We quote his political views.

Apparently the scientific argument for the anti-abortion side is so absurd that we don't need to waste our readers' time with it.

The reason I'm sending this note to all section editors is that I want everyone to understand how serious I am about purging all political bias from our coverage. We may happen to live in a political atmosphere that is suffused with liberal values (and is unreflective of the nation as a whole), but we are not going to push a liberal agenda in the news pages of the Times.

I'm no expert on abortion, but I know enough to believe that it presents a profound philosophical, religious and scientific question, and I respect people on both sides of the debate. A newspaper that is intelligent and fair-minded will do the same.

Let me know if you'd like to discuss this.

John

In many ways this incident violates the strong theory of corporate media control. First, if the theory were really true, then the memo should not have been written at all. That is, according to the *internalization* argument, Gold should have realized—while writing the article—that his superiors would consider it biased, and instead he would not have written such a biased article. Second, if monitoring reporters really is so easy and involves such little costs, then the editors and executives at the *Times* should have noticed the bias of the article *before* it was published, and they should have blocked it from appearing in the newspaper. Instead, the article appeared on the front

page. Third, if the strong theory really were true, Gold should have been fired, or at least severely punished, for the bias in the article. At a minimum, he should have been asked to apologize for the article.

Instead, Carroll apologized to Gold for writing the memo.<sup>4</sup>

### **Why no one, not even the Proponents of the Strong Theory, Really Believes That It's True**

I now offer one more piece of evidence against the strong theory. This, unlike the above pieces of evidence, show more than just the falsity of the theory. It also suggests that no one, not even the far-left proponents of the theory, really believes that it's true.

**(I)** The documentary “Outfoxed,” according to its web site, describes how Fox News is leading a “race to the bottom” in television news. It documents a number of cases where corporate bosses at Fox directed their employees how to report the news. For instance, Frank O'Donnell a former producer at the Fox affiliate in Washington, D.C. noted,

We received an order from one of Murdoch's apparatchiks, if you will, that we should cut away from our newscast and start carrying a fawning tribute to Ronald Reagan that was airing at the Republican National Convention.

The documentary also revealed a number of memos from John Moody, an executive vice president of Fox News, instructing reporters how to cover the day's news. The following are five of the memos:

(i) Let's spend a good deal of time on the battle over judicial nominations, which the President will address this morning. Nominees who both sides admit are qualified are being held up because of their POSSIBLE, not demonstrated, views on one issue – abortion. This should be a trademark issue for FNC today and in the days to come.

(ii) The so-called 9/11 commission has already been meeting. In fact, this is its eighth session. The fact that former Clinton and both former and current Bush administration officials are testifying gives it a certain tension, but this is not “what did he

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<sup>4</sup> For more details, see (i) “Texas OKs Disputed Abortion Legislation,” by Scott Gold, *Los Angeles Times*, May 22, 2003; (ii) “Memo on abortion and liberal bias by Los Angeles Times Editor John Carroll, May 22, 2003,” *L.A. Observed*, <http://www.laobserved.com/carrollmemo.html>; (iii) “Making Distinctions: Can John Carroll get the Times to Chew with its Mouth Closed?” by R.J. Smith, *Los Angeles Magazine*, September 1, 2003, pg. 75.

know and when did he know it” stuff. Don’t turn this in to Watergate.

(iii) Kerry’s speech on the economy at Georgetown is likely to move onto the topic of Iraq. We should take the beginning of Kerry’s speech, see if it contains new information (aside from a promise to create 10 million jobs) and see if other news at that time is more compelling. It is not required to take it start to finish.

(iv) Let’s refer to the US Marines we see in the foreground as “sharpshooters” not snipers, which carries a negative connotation.

(v) Thursday update: The pictures from Abu Ghraib prison are disturbing. They have rightly provoked outrage. Today we have a picture—aired on Al Arabiya—of an American hostage being held with a scarf over his eyes, clearly against his will. Who’s outraged on his behalf?

The film documents about a half-dozen additional instances where—it is clear to me and probably many other viewers—Fox executives indeed exerted control over their reporters. However, in fairness to the Fox executives, at least two points should be mentioned. First, although the film documents a dozen or so incidents of corporate control, it gives no systematic statistics to explain how common those incidents were. The incidents took place over a period of sixteen years, from 1988 to 2004, which means that the film documented less than one incident per year. (The film only showed a total of nine memos from Fox executives. The web site [www.mediamatters.com](http://www.mediamatters.com) reports that it obtained 33 such memos, and it lists 28 of the 33.) If those were the only incidents that occurred, then Fox executives are actually exerting very little control over their journalists.

Second, many of the incidents were not that meddlesome. For instance, many people would agree that (i) it is reasonable to call the Marines “sharpshooters” instead of “snipers,” (ii) the problems that the 9/11 commission ascribed to the Bush and Clinton administrations were not as bad as Watergate, and (iii) maybe it was not so newsworthy to broadcast the *entire* Kerry speech.<sup>5</sup> If a corporate boss wants to run a truly fair, balanced, and unbiased network, maybe he *should* direct his employees to act in the above ways.

But here’s the most remarkable aspect about the film’s description of the above incidents: It suggests that the incidents are peculiar to Fox, not a common behavior of all U.S. media outlets. Indeed, at the end of the segment,

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<sup>5</sup> Further, if you carefully re-read the above memo about the Kerry speech, you see that it actually instructs reporters to cover *at least* the first part of the speech. Further, note that the memo allows reporters to use their own discretion about covering the latter part of the speech.

Walter Cronkite explains, “I’ve never heard of any other network, nor any other legitimate news organization, doing that—newspaper or broadcast.”

But if you really believe the strong theory of corporate media—that corporate executives at *all* the major U.S. news outlets are *constantly* exerting control—then the above incidents shouldn’t bother you. Instead, you should say, “Oh yeah. That happens all the time. It’s probably at least as bad as that at ABC, CBS, NBC, and CNN.”

Indeed, maybe the most curious aspect of the entire documentary involves a quote by Robert McChesney, stated just after the Cronkite quote. McChesney, you may recall from the opening quotes of this chapter, claims that journalists have as much say over their reporting as “factory workers and foremen have over what a factory produces.” Yet, during an on-camera close-up, he explains,

The real revolutionary breakthrough at Fox has been—it’s eliminated journalism. I mean, that’s the thing to understand that Fox News Channel has done is it’s stripped out any notion of journalism as we’ve traditionally understood it from its product. There is no journalism at the Fox News Channel.

But if a person really believed that U.S. journalists are like factor workers, he would not have any special ire for Fox, nor would he call its techniques “revolutionary.”

### **The Weak Version of the Corporate-Media Theory**

Notwithstanding the claims of Alterman (“you’re only as liberal as the man who owns you”) and McChesney (U.S. journalists are like factory workers), many would call the strong theory of corporate control a straw man. That is, they would suggest that no one really believes it is true, and therefore, my contradictory evidence is really not that interesting.

For that reason, let me discuss a relaxed form of the theory, one which therefore is more difficult to disprove. Call this the Weak Theory of Corporate Media. It asserts that the political views of corporate executives, although maybe not all-important, are still more important than the political views of the journalists they employ. This theory says, for instance, that if a journalist has liberal views, but her corporate boss has conservative views, then her reporting will have a right-of-center bias. Likewise, if she has conservative views, while her corporate boss has liberal views, then her reporting will have a left-of-center bias.

The following are some pieces of evidence, however, that disprove even the Weak Theory.

**(I)** John Stossel, the co-anchor of ABC’s 20/20 between xx and xx, is very up-front about his personal political views. He calls himself a libertarian. On economic issues he favors less government spending, abolishing the

Education Department, and getting rid of agriculture subsidies. On regulation, Stossel says, “I would pass the Stossel Rule—for every new law they pass, they would have to repeal two old ones.”

On social and foreign-policy issues he often agrees with liberals. “I am skeptical of nation-building,” he says. “I also think the drug war is a huge mistake.” He believes that flag-burning should not be outlawed, and he believes “homosexuality is not unnatural and not something that should be legislated against.”<sup>6</sup> Of all U.S. politicians, his views are probably closest to Ron Paul’s, whose *PQ* is 32.

In 1995, ABC was bought by Disney. This means that from 1995 to xx, Stossel’s ultimate boss was the chairman of Disney’s board of directors, who from xx to xx, was former U.S. Senator George Mitchell (D-Maine). Mitchell’s *PQ* is 86.

In terms of studying the corporate-media theory, the Stossel-Mitchell case is a goldmine. Because Stossel is so open about his political views, and because his corporate boss served in Congress, it is one of the few cases where we know the *PQ* of a journalist and his corporate boss.

The midpoint of the *PQ*’s of Mitchell and Stossel is 59.5 ( $=[33+86]/2$ ). This would be Stossel’s *Slant Quotient* if his reporting were *equally* influenced by his own personal views and the views of Mitchell. However, if the Weak Theory of Corporate Control is true, then Stossel’s *Slant Quotient* should be *greater than 59.5*—that is, closer to Mitchell’s than his own. Since this number is greater than 50.4, the Weak Theory predicts that Stossel’s reporting should have a *liberal* bias.

Yet, most people would agree—and perhaps leftwing critics would *especially* agree—that Stossel’s reporting has, if anything, a *conservative* bias.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the Stossel-Mitchell case strongly contradicts the Weak Theory.

A similar argument applies to Keith Olbermann, who admits that his views are left of center. Meanwhile, when Olbermann worked at MSNBC, he claimed that the bosses of MSNBC’s parent company, GE, had conservative views.<sup>8</sup> Yet no one will deny, Olbermann’s reporting, while at MSNBC, was left-of-center. Again, this contradicts the Weak Theory.

**(II)** Sometimes journalists report stories about an ownership change at a news outlet. In these stories the reporter will often insert a statement that reflects his or her own concern about the new owner—that he might exert more control over his new employees than the prior owner did. The following are a few examples. See if you can spot a verb that is common to all the stories.

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<sup>6</sup> See “John Stossel: Not Afraid to Tell the Truth,” by Ed Sigall, June 3, 2006, <http://archive.newsmag.com/archives/articles/2006/6/2/91815/shtml?s=lh>.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, the left-wing groups, Fairness and Accuracy in Media and Media Matters, commonly criticize Stossel. The two groups have written more than 50 reports criticizing his reporting..

<sup>8</sup> Specifically, he told Brian Lamb in an interview on C-SPAN, “There are people I know in the hierarchy of NBC, the company, and GE, the company, who do not like to see the current [i.e. George W. Bush’s] presidential administration criticized at all.” See Lloyd Grove, “A Furious George Hits Gutless Dems,” *Daily News*, March 13, 2006.

- In 2000, billionaire Wendy McCaw purchased the Santa Barbara News-Press. Many of the writers at the newspaper opposed the takeover, and relations between McCaw and her employees blew up in February, 2007. Six of the journalists placed a sign over a freeway overpass, urging people to cancel their subscriptions. In response, McCaw fired the six journalists. “The turmoil at the newspaper began in July,” reported the Associated Press, “when several top editors quit and claimed [McCaw] meddled in the newsroom.”<sup>9</sup>
- Describing the same story, the New York Times reported, “[A] full-blown war erupted last July between Mrs. McCaw, a local billionaire, and the staff of her newsroom over protests that she was meddling in news decisions...”<sup>10</sup>
- In March, 2007, Rupert Murdoch began talks to buy the Dow Jones Company, which owned the Wall Street Journal. Two months later, Jo Becker of the New York Times reported that members of the Bancroft family, which controlled Dow Jones, sought elaborate assurances from Murdoch that the *Journal’s* reporters would not lose editorial control. “When [Murdoch] bought The Times of London in 1981,” wrote Becker, “he gave similar assurances, but some former editors say he meddled with news operations anyway.”<sup>11</sup>
- Discussing the same story, on June 5, 2007, the Agence France-Press reported that Murdoch’s company “announced a five-billion-dollar takeover bid for Dow Jones in May, but it was initially rejected by the Bancroft family amid fears about editorial meddling.”<sup>12</sup>
- On November 10, 2006, shortly after Dean Baquet resigned as *Los Angeles Times* editor, the *Times* published a story about the clashing cultures between the newsroom and the Tribune Co., the owner of the *Times*. Several *Times* reporters hoped that a local billionaire such as Eli Broad, Ron Burkle, or David Geffen would try to buy the *Times*. However, the article noted that “Others

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<sup>9</sup> Associated Press, “Six Journalists Fired at News-Press,” February 7, 2007, 12:27pm, <http://www.breitbart.com/news/2007/02/07/D8N500E80.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Sharon Waxman, “A Newsroom Fight Spills Into the Streets of a Once-Peaceful Town,” *New York Times*, January 15, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Jo Becker, “Murdoch Reaches Out for Even More,” *New York Times*, June 25, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Agence France-Presse, “Dow Jones union woos Buffett in bid to foil Murdoch,” June 5, 2007, 3:22pm.

recoiled at the idea, citing the foibles of Broad, Geffen, and Burkle and the possibility of their meddling in news decisions.”<sup>13</sup>

The common verb is “meddle.” This is the word that all of the above journalists use to describe the potential control that the new owner might exert over his employees.

According to Webster’s, “meddle” means “to interest oneself in what is not one’s concern; interfere without right or propriety.”

It is a strange word to use if the Weak Theory is really true. If the boss’s views are really more important than the journalist’s own views, then the above writers should have used a stronger verb—one like “direct” or “control” or “order.”

Further, in each of the above cases, the journalist was concerned that the new corporate boss would exert *more* control than the old corporate boss. Thus, the old corporate boss was exerting even less control than the verb “meddling” implies.

**(III)** Mathew Gentzkow and Jesse Shapiro are two rising-star economists who have conducted some interesting and brilliant analyses of the news industry. In one of their studies, similar to my and Milyo’s, they calculate an objective measure of the slant of a newspaper.<sup>14</sup> In Chapter 15 of *Left Turn*, I explain more details of their measure, and I show why it generally agrees with the main conclusions of the measure that Milyo and I designed.

But for now, what is most important is how they *apply* their measure. Specifically, they use it to see which factors help to predict the slant of a newspaper. For instance, as they find, one of the most important factors is the *ideology of the consumers* in a newspaper’s geographic market.<sup>15</sup> For instance, they find that if the average customer becomes 10 points more liberal on their ideological scale, then the slant of newspaper will become about one point more liberal on the same scale.

Even more interesting, the authors examine an *ownership-effect* variable, and they test its influence on the slant of a newspaper. The variable measures, for instance, the degree to which newspapers owned by the Gannet Company (or any other person or company) tend to have a more liberal or conservative slant than the researchers’ model would otherwise predict—based on things like the ideology of the customers of the newspaper.

The variable measures, among other things, the “consumption value” that an owner might derive from a owning newspaper. That is, for instance, if the owner has conservative views, then, instead of maximizing profits, he

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<sup>13</sup> James Rainey, “A Media Match Plagued by a Clash of Cultures,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 10, 2006, p. C1.

<sup>14</sup> See “What Drives Media Slant: Evidence from U.S. Daily Newspapers,” Version May 24, 2007, <http://faculty.chicagobooth.edu/jesse.shapiro>.

<sup>15</sup> To measure the ideology of a market, Gentzkow and Shapiro note all the donations to political candidates. Next, they calculate the percent of those donations that went to a Republican. This expresses the degree to which the market is conservative. who gave to a Republican calculate the percent of citizens who donate to a Republican candidate versus the

might direct the newspaper to adopt a slant that is more conservative than the slant that would maximize profits, given the consumers in the newspaper's market.

However, Gentzkow and Shapiro found that the owner-effect variable was statistically indistinguishable from zero, and the (point-estimate) effect of the variable was a tiny fraction of the consumer-ideology variable. For instance, in one thought experiment, the authors suggest that if we moved to a world where all newspaper markets were ideologically identical (i.e. all the consumers of the Daily Oklahoman became just as liberal as consumers as the Los Angeles Times, who became just as liberal as consumers of the Dallas Morning News, and so on), then this would reduce the diversity of newspaper slants by 22%. Meanwhile, if instead we moved to a world where all newspapers reported to the same owner, then this would reduce the diversity of newspaper slants by less than one-tenth of one percent. As the authors conclude, the owner of a newspaper has only a "negligible" effect on its slant.

#### (IV) Lessons from the Journalist controversy.

Consider the controversy I described—in Chapter 7 of *Left Turn*—from the Journalist list-serve. Several of the journalists, you may recall, were conspiring with one other, discussing how angry they were that some media outlets reported the Rev. Wright, "God damn America" sermon.

The anecdote reveals not only that the Weak Theory is false (which in turn implies that the Strong Theory is false as well). It also reveals that progressive journalists don't really believe it.

Note how angry the Journalist journalists were at ABC's Brian Ross. However, if the Weak Theory were really true, their anger should have been directed more at *the boss* of Brian Ross. Note that they don't even mention him or her.

Further, note how the Journalist members were discussing how *they* should retaliate. If the Weak Theory were really true, they should have been noting how their bosses had instructed them to retaliate.

#### **But Can't the Owner Control the Slant by Hiring Journalists Who Agree with his Views?**

Many people will respond to the above analysis with the following thought: "Maybe corporate executives don't tell their journalists how to report the news. But the corporate executives still hire the journalists. If they want their outlet to have a conservative slant, they can do this simply by hiring more conservatives; and likewise they can produce a liberal slant by hiring more liberals."

Here is my response to that response: I agree.

The above response to my argument means that if we want to determine the slant of a news outlet, we can get a good approximation simply by observing the personal views of the journalists—the people whom the

corporate boss hired. It means that—if you want to determine the bias of the media—Chapters 9 and 10 of *Left Turn*, which examined surveys of journalists, explain everything about bias, or at least most of it.