

# The inherent and harmful dynamics of media in a capitalist economy

by [Trond Andresen](#)

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*Below is a compressed presentation (it is based on slides from a lecture) of what I consider to be facts relating to the importance of media in a modern society, and dynamic mechanisms at work which decide the character of media in a capitalist economy.*

I am grateful for any [response](#).

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## A. Society as a complex organism with a drug problem - a metaphor

- 1) Modern society, as opposed to simple and self-sufficient hunter/gatherer or farming communities, is specialized through parts or sub-units which interact and are very interdependent. In this sense modern society is a complex organism, as opposed to a one-cell "primitive" organism. Any complex organism needs a nervous system and a brain for survival.
  - 2) Media constitute an important part of the modern society organism's nervous system and brain.
  - 3) The first role of media - as nervous system - is to inform the organism as a whole what is going on in the different parts of it. This is of crucial importance to insure well-being and even survival.
  - 4) The second role of media is to be part of society's "brain" (other parts of the brain are organizations, research, academia, culture) The media part of the brain processes information flowing from the nervous system by holding debates, digging up facts, confronting the responsible persons in power, etc.
  - 5) The third role is again as nervous system: Sending out signals that ensure that the organism takes appropriate action.
  - 6) It is obvious that false information flowing in, wrong priorities or distortion in the processing with ensuing uncorrect signals being sent out again, is harmful.
  - 7) It is maybe not so obvious that "innocent" soap and entertainment may also do harm. But in such a situation, necessary information gathering, processing and action are crowded out, do not occur or are delayed. Then we have an organism who may be "happy" for the moment, but whose brain and nervous system are dulled by permanent "intoxication".
  - 8) If the extent of intoxication is such that problems threatening the continued existence of the organism are not solved, even if such dangerous problems are recognized in sober moments, we have self-destructive dope addiction.
  - 9) For the societal organism the addiction mechanism is the profit motive driving the media industry. And since soap and trivia give the largest income with the smallest costs, this will dominate.
  - 11) A secondary -- but still important -- factor that is also harmful to the information processing system of the societal organism, are the strong incentives for narcissism and self-importance among media personnel. These incentives are also at work in non-commercial media. More in section C.
  - 12) A final analogy: A dope addict is masterful at self-deception, telling himself and his surroundings that he is more or less OK; this is a natural psychic defense mechanism. The media owners, and their apologists at the editorial level are just as good at deception and self-deception, defending the status quo. See also point C(7).
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## **B. Media "dynamic laws" (mostly economic)**

- 1) Given no other restriction, any commercial medium (broadcast or paper) will tend towards an editorial policy which gives the maximum revenue for the minimum cost.
  - 2) Economies of scale both in broadcasting and the printed press are extreme. The acquisition and processing of information demands an expensive infrastructure, and skilled and expensive personnel. On the other hand, the marginal cost of reaching one person more is practically zero for broadcast media, and practically equal to the paper + distribution cost for one extra sample in the case of paper media.
  - 3) Due to these extreme economies of scale, small setbacks can lead to catastrophic consequences for a medium which is not firmly established at the top. This makes for strong susceptibility to owner/advertiser pressure. It is also conducive to self-censorship.
  - 4) Advertising-dependence is a worse way of ensuring audience influence on the character of media compared to direct audience influence, since advertisers and audiences do not have similar objectives. The same holds for investor/owner-dependence.
  - 5) Other things being equal (f.inst. equal audience), advertisers (and investors) will favour the media which are the more editorially friendly to business interests.
  - 6) Journalists/editors will, when conflicts arise, usually and in the final instance yield to the demands of media owners.
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## **C. More media "dynamic laws" (economic and psychological, concerning media personnel)**

- 1) Wage size is an especially dangerous incentive for a journalist, since wage size and a corresponding lifestyle will colour the product (s)he delivers, as opposed to wage size for f. inst. an electrician or a carpenter. The largest media are able to pay the highest wages, due to the extreme economies of scale in media.
- 2) Wage *differentials* between the largest and the smaller media are thus large. In fact, few other highly qualified categories of employees have higher wage differentials in spite of similar work and level of competence, than journalists. Journalists are very aware of this and plan their career accordingly. This means rich and large media receiving experienced personnel who have been "educated" and trained in the poorer media.
- 3) Access to and friendly relationships with persons in power and celebrities are other dangerous incentives for a journalist. The largest media ensure the best access. Journalists are very aware of this and plan their career accordingly. See also point (5) and (6) below.
- 4) Persons in power are very aware of this and mete out access and news tidbits as a reward to non-critical or powerful journalists.
- 5) The journalist profession is for good or bad, exhibitionist: What you produce is there for everyone to evaluate, the public and your colleagues. This is an incentive for development of narcissism and self-importance, *and must therefore be deliberately resisted to be avoided*. It is also an incentive for competitiveness and individualism between colleagues, against solidarity in the media workplace.
- 6) The incentive for narcissism and self-importance has been greatly strengthened with the increasing dominance of television and other visual media (glossy magazines etc.). This also feeds back to the written media, with newspapers promoting certain journalists resembling the way the entertainment industry promotes their celebrities (bylines with pictures of the journalist is just one trivial example). Thus journalism's traditional ideal motive of genuine interest in the issues and problems of society is to an increasing degree being substituted with a new motive: "Journalism" as posturing, in the sense of being a celebrity and being one of the select on an exclusive "scene" in front of a large audience. This trend among other things leads to airheads from the modeling and "beauty" industry getting jobs as TV "news" presenters.

7) Journalists are gatekeepers. At the editorial level they make direct decisions about who will be the few among many that shall be allowed to get through and reach many others with their concerns. But also most rank and file journalists exercise selection powers: they choose their topics, sources, contacts and how to present the issue. The public is very aware of this power asymmetry when trying to get access to the media. For the public this is an incentive to grovel and be excessively thankful for any opening given. The objectively existing and strong power asymmetry versus the public implies a cognitive dissonance for many in the media profession, since it collides with a self-image of being a humble and professional mediator of important issues for society. This state of affairs is tackled by most of them by pretending the asymmetry is non-existent. Or it may be openly recognised by the more cynical, and relished and abused.

8) The above negative psychological and economic incentives at work among journalists engender an attitude towards the public of unease and cynicism - and a self-obsession and unhealthy "cameraderie" within the profession. One consequence of this is that the most important feedback for most journalists is what colleagues say - the public is not very important. Another consequence of such self-obsession in the profession is that they tend to over-use colleagues as sources and participants in their reports and stories.

9) All the above contributes to low esteem from the public towards the profession. And this again amplifies the above-mentioned negative attitudes from journalists towards the public, and an automatic closing of ranks when criticism is raised.

10) Journalists - like advertising people - have rhetorics as one tool of their trade. Thus they are very good at convincing both themselves and their surroundings that their practice is always, regardless of outside criticism, justified.

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#### **D. Still more media "dynamic laws" (psychological, concerning the public)**

1) Due to their nature and socialization, a significant part of the public (for convenience grouped in a crude category here labeled "type 1") will prefer entertainment over news and current affairs.

2) Furthermore, the type of news and current affairs most popular with them will be about events, not issues, i.e. news-as-entertainment, before insight.

3) Thirdly, concerning the type of news and current affairs intended to give insight, type 1 of the public will prefer the category that confirms, not questions, their attitudes and world view.

4) Type 1 is - as a general rule - not interested in active participation in a democratic process. Either they don't see the need for it, or they feel such endeavor is futile.

5) The above four points indicate that the traits of the public itself, and not only economic mechanisms and motivation of media personnel, must be considered in a critical analysis of media in a capitalist economy.

6) Another significant part of the public (here crudely grouped as "type 2") is *not* as described above. They are actively interested in news and current affairs pertaining to insight and change, and wish to participate actively in a democratic process.

7) The relationship between the media and the two defined types of public is interactive: The media shape (socialize) the public, and public preferences and response influence the media. Furthermore, the two categories of public interact with each other.

8) These relationships are dynamic, i.e. things will change with time. And since they are very complex and non-linear, we may predict that there is more than one possible state of equilibrium. This again means that other states of affairs than today's are feasible.

9) One feasible future transition scenario is a positive feedback (a "good spiral") initiated by the media gradually moving in a "type 2" direction in their editorial policy. This increases the size and vigour of the "type 2" public category and correspondingly reduces the "type 1" group. It also sets into motion positive feedback processes within the public, increasing democratic participation and general political activity. This again feeds back to the

media and reinforces the process.

10) Another factor which may initiate the same process is a backlash reaction from the type 1 public due to accumulated disgust with a media system turning too blatantly commercial.

This may contribute to a process similar to that described in (9).

11) But opposite future scenarios - also incorporating positive (self-reinforcing) feedback processes - are possible; characterized by weakening and depletion of the type 2 public category, increasing public non-participation and apathy, and media commercialism.

12) A "good spiral" as in (9) and (10) is (while not sufficient) a necessary prerequisite for true democracy to emerge - and, based on the analysis in subsection A, -

- *also necessary for the (literal-sense) survival of modern, complex societies!*

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