Professor Englehardt raises two important questions: Why and how should we regulate the media? The problems associated with media consolidation were presciently illustrated almost thirty years ago in Sidney Lumet’s brilliant satire of commercial broadcast journalism, *Network* (1976). Forget Marshall McLuhan and the global village, the true prognosticator of the future media/society relationship was Lumet. His frighteningly realistic depiction of a fictional television network, the United Broadcasting Service (UBS), cuts so close to the bone of today’s media reality that one wonders whether art might not be a predictive science.

The narrative opens with the UBS network being taken over by a giant but secretive conglomerate, the reach of whose tentacular involvements in globalized corporate capitalism are hidden and mysterious. Two dramatic movements open the action. First, the new owners, complaining about ratings for the network’s evening news show (depicted explicitly as part of the Edward R. Murrow tradition of professional journalism), take away the independence of the UBS news division, and place it under the management of the entertainment division of the network. (This is much like what actually followed in the eighties, under Reagan-era deregulation, as television news content was increasingly determined by ratings pressure rather than traditional news values.) Second, the new managers fire one of the established anchors, considered too stodgy and old-school for the audience (and thus the corporate sponsors) they were trying to attract.

What follows is one of the greatest ironic twists ever shown in American cinema. The fired anchor, Howard Beal, has a nervous breakdown, on the air, during what was supposed to be his final broadcast, and
launches into a spontaneous, passionate outburst of populist rage against the new owners of UBS. The ratings for the show sky-rocket during his speech. The next day, seeing the ratings numbers, the new management team decides to give Howard Beal a platform for his “jeremiads,” so long as he can maintain his frothy level of vitriolic spectacle. As the plot unfolds, the news show comes increasingly to take on the characteristics of entertainment television, in fact, bearing an uncanny resemblance to many of today’s “reality” television shows, with staged encounters, hyped “events,” and the glitz and “zazz” of a Vegas (or Branson) stage revue. Traditional news content shrinks while increasingly outrageous attention-getting strategies compete in a spiral of incoherent emotion and sensation. Divorced from context and reason, the truths and insights that do emerge are lost, instantly, amidst the collective din of a thousand apoplectic rants.

Beal’s jeremiads become increasingly entertaining, but also increasingly emotional and irrational, as his mind descends into madness, paralleling the track of the media culture around him. The descent culminates in a famous scene in which Beal shouts the great line, “I’m mad as hell, and I’m not gonna take it any more!” He urges his viewers to “get up! Get up! GET UP out of your seats! Open your windows! Open your windows and shout, ‘I’M MAD AS HELL, AND I’M NOT GONNA TAKE IT ANYMORE!’”

And they do. All across the metropolis, windows are flung open, everyone is screaming at the top of their lungs, “I’m mad as hell, and I’m not gonna take it anymore!” And they are mad as hell. But they ARE going to take it – more and more. In a subtle irony lost on many, they are already taking it, especially at that climatic and self-defeating moment of impotent protest: an unfocused, ineffective cry into the void, cathartic at best, performed, on command, by virtual automatons, at the behest of the very system from which they are supposedly no longer “taking it.” It is a bit like the moment when Nike bought the Beatles’ “Revolution” from Michael Jackson, and used it to sell its shoes. Like a judo master, globalized commercial media take the force of your resistance and redirect it back at you, selling you your own revolution in a perverse commodity exchange, hypnotizing you into thinking your empty rhetorical or symbolic posturing is somehow making you free, while the “ka-ching” of cash registers echo quietly in the background.

The “back story” in *Network*, the acquisition of UBS by a large conglomerate, is no accident. Media consolidation drives media content,
including journalism, in predictable directions. By the end of the eighties, after the first great wave of corporate media consolidation, the “wall” separating the editorial offices of the newsrooms and the business offices of the networks was down. That is a predictable outcome of media consolidation. When a business interest (with a broad range of other business interests), responsible to shareholders to show a steady profit, acquires a new business, whether it is a shoe factory or a television network, the overriding purpose of that acquisition is to buy low, make a profit, and sell high. There is instantly pressure to increase profits. You do that by producing news programming determined, not by news values, but by ratings values. Favorited news stories become stories that will catch the eyes and stop the finger of the most (and most affluent) channel-surfers. Other pressures on content arise: pressures to support the interests of other businesses in the conglomerate’s “family” of companies, and the corollary, pressures to squelch stories that might negatively affect the profits of such companies.

The unfortunate science of making a profit on television is clear: the greater the shock and outrageousness of the spectacle, the greater the ratings. Vulgar programming is a cheaper and safer investment, requiring little development, talent, etc. — a perfectly rational and predictable product of a hyper-commercialized and hyper-concentrated system. With only four or five conglomerates owning virtually every channel you see on cable television, there is less competitive pressure to do something else. The second great deregulation wave of the nineties gave us a race to the bottom in television programming, with news programming right there alongside Entertainment Tonight and American Idol (which, not coincidentally, was hyped endlessly in the local and national news shows owned by Fox, which owns, of course, American Idol).

Thirty years after Sidney Lumet and screenwriter Paddy Chayefsky offered the world a forward-looking vision of American broadcast journalism in the age of media consolidation, George Clooney is releasing his backward-looking vision of broadcast journalism in the golden age of independent TV news. *Good Night, and Good Luck* (Clooney 2005) is equally revealing about our current time, demonstrating what we have become by reminding us of what we have lost. The film tells the story of the quintessential American anchorman, Edward R. Murrow, famously throwing down the gauntlet to the red-baiting Joseph McCarthy, and possibly saving America from becoming a one-party nation. Considering the
question of media ownership regulations in 2005, there is little doubt we look more like yesterday's nightmare than its Golden Age. With the health of our democracy at stake, we must turn the clock back on media consolidation.

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