

PIBCI - Monthly Perspective

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Don't be distracted

A quick glance across the past month's media landscape would have us believe that it's doing its job by informing and entertaining the public. Surely, the coverage of rolling state lockdowns, reports of the federal government's botched vaccine roll-out, Australia's Olympic exploits, and the so-called 'space race' between three of the world's most wealthy oligarchs is worthy news? A deeper dive into the cacophony of news, opinion and trivia reveals a different picture. Through the lens of a critical eye, we can see news that is hand-picked and views specifically crafted for mass consumption. Meanwhile, other news-worthy items are selectively omitted from the public. Given that Australia's media is one of the most concentrated in the world, it is little wonder that behind the façade of choice and abundance resides an industry that is reliant on corporations spending big on advertising and the promotion of certain beliefs and values that reinforces certain behaviours.

So what is the role of the corporate media in Australia? Who does it really serve, and what impact does it have on the broader community? Does the media hold those in power to account? Or does it help to mould the public's opinion and its core values?

Keeping focussed in an age of distraction

The huge strides in technological advancement have given us the ability to obtain information faster and from across every corner of the world. We no longer need to rely on traditional media avenues such as television, radio and the print media to get our news. All this information can be delivered to your device at any time and almost anywhere in the world. This capability should increase our awareness and build our knowledge of what is happening in our community and what is happening across the world. It should also provide access to a plethora of views so we can better understand social challenges and how best to make political decisions that can benefit the broader community. However, the over-abundance of information, much of it packaged as 'infotainment' tends to oversimplify and

trivialise complex issues, obscure the facts, and as a consequence pave the way for poor decision making.

Behind the constant stream of distraction is the corporate media who dominate the communication landscape. The lion's share of the mass media is firmly held in the hands of Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. This is followed by Fairfax, Kerry Stokes' channel seven and the Channel 9 and Australian Consolidated Press. Outside of these, there is the Government funded ABC. Beyond this, there is very little that gets to see the light of day. So what does the handful of corporate media outlets do?

Superimposing Views and Needs

The corporate owned media's mission is to generate profit. Its largest revenue spinner comes from advertising. The endless sea of irrelevance telling you to update your lounge room furniture suite, impress your friends with a luxury car and the like is the foundation stone for the corporate media. Beneath the adverts is the more insidious message that the corporate media communicates through all its avenues – the need to maintain the status quo. For corporations to make larger and larger profits, the mass media factory needs to produce a specific kind of diet fit for public consumption. This diet primarily includes a skewed view of the world where celebrities dominate the daily headlines, where sporting events and sports people saturate the airwaves, and where politics is sensationalised. All of this is to ensure the public's focus is redirected away from important social, economic and political issues and onto sensationalised events, celebrities' lives and other trivial matters.

This constant cacophony of news, opinion and consumerism churned out by the corporate media is designed to distract people from recognising their real needs and superimposing a false set of values based on consumerism, consumption, competition, corporatism and capitalism.

The over-abundance of entertainment based on the cult of celebrity and sensationalisation ensures citizens do not spend time thinking about the painful limitations of the current political system, the widening social inequalities. Both the corporate and government media do not want the public seriously

contemplating social or political alternatives that can replace the existing market system of economics that has been failing the majority for the past four decades. So how does the mass media successfully promote its set of views and values on the broader public?

A template for failure

The corporate media strategically manipulates public opinion through indoctrinating people into the world of consumption, consumerism, and competition. The corporate media imposes this myopic template which limits the parameters of social, political and economic change into the sand box of the neoliberalism – a system that bases itself on a corporate culture and the capitalist market system.

Complicit to this approach are the large corporations (that either advertise through the corporate media or own them outright) and the government who continue to promote the neoliberal ideology despite decades of failures, the 2008 global financial crisis that shook the world, and the continuing rolling crisis.

It is evident that forty years of neoliberalism has not brought about general economic wealth. We have not witnessed the emergence of a self-regulating market system nor has neoliberalism pegged back inequality. The 2008 global financial crisis discredited neoliberalism and highlighted how socially, politically and economically noxious it is to the majority of people across the globe. Regardless of the incontrovertible mountain of evidence against the neoliberal approach, governments and corporate leaders continue to be beholden to a failed system. They continue to promote it as the ‘one and only way’ via the mass media. There are other ways, yet, they are simply not being presented to the public more broadly. On the occasion they make their way into the mass media, it is usually communicated as ‘unrealistic’ or ‘utopian’ or supported by ‘fringe-dwellers’.

Whilst a global pandemic rages across the world, the corporate media sticks to its formula of sedating the public by administering an endless supply of sporting events, celebrity glitz and glamour. Political events are either dumbed-down or sensationalised beyond comprehension. The mass media distracts us from real-

world events and points to all that is sensationalised minus depth and meaning. The egoistic space exploits of the world's richest men was presented as something it was not. The space sideshow highlighted how the corporate media works. It sidelined the big issues of the day such as the raging pandemic and global climate emergency and sensationalised the world's richest oligarchs take a jaunt into orbit. Trumpeted as daring space pioneers, Virgin boss, Richard Branson and Amazon boss Jeff Bezos blasted massive carbon footprints into the earth's atmosphere as they launched their new business ventures. In reality, the world's first cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin took the big risks and commenced pioneering space travel back in 1961. Many others followed taking risks and some losing their lives decades ago. Such space missions supported scientific research for the betterment of humankind. They did not aim to open up private travel agencies for billionaires. During this time, the corporate media never questioned the appalling working conditions of Amazon's workers and workers' strikes for better conditions. As Branson pumped billions into Virgin's new space venture, the corporate media did not remind us that Virgin Australia sought a \$1.4 billion coronavirus bailout from Australian taxpayers.

There is no incentive for the corporate media to bring business leaders or politicians to account. Investigative journalism has been snuffed out by the vested interests of media moguls who do not want to upset big business who pay vast sums of money for advertising in papers, on radio and TV. To illustrate this point, the initial media criticism of billionaire Gerry Harvey, the chairman of Harvey Norman who defied political pressure to pay back an estimated \$22 million in Jobkeeper after the retailer's profits more than doubled during the pandemic came to a rapid halt when he threatened to pull out his big advertising dollars.

For decades, the corporate elites have been losing confidence in our democratic institutions and its suitability to reshape society to support their market imperatives. Neoliberalism has assisted their aim to cleanse democratic politics through the introduction of privatisation and deregulation. The former effectively places public assets into private hands, and the latter weakens workers' rights and safety. As a consequence, we have witnessed the rise in the wealth of billionaires (during the pandemic) and the widening of inequality in Australia.

Keeping focus on the major social and political issues is key to understanding the dynamics of the main game – power and politics. Asking questions is vital to knowing what is really happening. Being engaged and active is essential in promoting social and political progress.

Critical Thinking or Compliance

To tackle a problem, we need to understand the problem, and we need to have a firm grasp of all of the necessary facts. Critical thinking is a step in the right direction. It is based on actively analysing and conceptualising information gathered from a broad range of angles; everything from observation through to experience and reflection. It also calls upon individuals to accurately and clearly communicate with others and take action based on sound evidence and fairness. Working against our capacity to critically think is ideology. The dominant neoliberal ideology presents a lazy world view that is served up 24/7 via TV, radio, the print media and over the internet. The role of a corporate media employee is to take complex social and political issues and water them down to the point that it is packaged in virtual tablet-form for public consumption. Unlike critical thinking, ideology through the mass media promotes bias, distorts views and presents partial facts which may be based upon uninformed opinion or prejudiced views. Ideology channelled through the corporate or government media is self-serving and relies on a population that is uncritical and willing to believe all that is presented on a screen, a broadsheet or over the radio waves.

A dominant ideology thrives on an insecure public susceptible to fear, fascination and sensationalisation. It heavily relies on an uncritical public that accepts the dross that makes the daily headlines. In essence, the neoliberal ideology is little different to other ideologies which play on emotions of the public, turns the dial on social fears and is willing to ratchet up stress and anxiety within society in order to serve its one ends – keeping itself in power. This has been demonstrated by the over-inflated risks posed by vaccines, the sensationalisation of state lockdowns and the inflated China scare campaign. Each of these issues plays on fear and anxiety.

The primary aim of the neoliberal ideology is to train the public to be docile. This means a public willing to suspend its ability to question those in power, and conforming to the status quo.

We know that the current social and political system is failing the majority of Australians. We know that it is vital that we interrogate each item of news and all the opinion pieces the corporate and government media throw in our direction. We also know that there is a better way. Key to this is the fight against political apathy.

The political class supported by the billionaire owned media is comfortable with a disengaged population that places comfort ahead of political control. A disconnected citizenry addicted to consumerism and the sense of safety offered by the ruling political class facilitates wider conformism that puts the breaks on social and political progress. Being informed is one key step. Having the facts at hand is another. Being politically active is vital to ensuring the public's interests are placed ahead of corporate interests.

The neoliberal agenda has not strengthened nor supported strong democratic institutions. Nor has it helped to inform the electorate about viable political options, solid economic alternatives or new approaches that can build a strong and cohesive society. The neoliberal agenda has simply worked to generate larger and larger profits for the biggest corporations and the richest individuals in our nation. The status quo is what they want, and that is why old politicians and old ideas are recycled and presented to the public as something new.

Change is in your hands

It is clear that the neoliberal agenda has had four decades to burrow its way into our institutions in an effort to mould public opinion and set the social and political agenda. Key to this is the corporate media's full support which has been instrumental in promoting the neoliberal 'one and only way' into the future. Yet, when we look back on the last 40 years of neoliberalism, it is evident that it has weakened our democracy. Power now rests in fewer hands. The media is owned by a small number of billionaires. Our universities have been weakened. Public assets have been sold off. Funding for social services have been cut. It is little

wonder that inequality has grown alongside the increase in billionaires' and corporate profits. In a nation as wealthy as Australia, why is there rising homelessness and child poverty? Why does the wealth of billionaires continue to rise in the face of growing poverty and a pandemic?

It is clear that neoliberalism has been exceptionally profitable for a small section of society. Such wealth comes at the cost of the 99%. Despite the growing inequality gap, the major political parties are either incapable or unwilling to disconnect from the neoliberal agenda of privatisation and deregulation. With Labor now throwing its support behind the Coalition's third stage of tax cuts, we will witness the rich getting richer through changes that will scrap the 37 per cent tax bracket for those earning above \$120,000, making those earners the biggest winners from the cuts. This will cost around \$19 billion a year and add to the burgeoning inequality gap. Clearly, the major political parties have a vested interest in keeping the status quo.

As citizens, it is our role to ask the hard questions, bring politicians to account, demand transparency from corporate leaders and seek a fairer and more equitable society. We need to press for alternatives that address the climate emergency. We need to call for a universal basic income, we need to petition for a more equitable education system, better social housing and a treaty with the traditional owners of this land. We need to work towards broadening our economy beyond the neoliberal sand-box that includes collectives and cooperatives. We need to do much better.

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