

Media & Democracy

Media/Democracy Paradox Assignment

The situation:

The year is 2025. A chance encounter with Robert McChesney on an international flight and some amazing follow-up conversations afterward landed you in a very important position with a media education consulting company. As part of your job, you are invited to a dinner to help facilitate a conversation among three individuals and yourself. One attendee is an avid consumer of broadcast network news (choose one: ABC, NBC, CBS, or FOX). Another attendee is a person who works for the parent company of that broadcast network news corporation (The Walt Disney Company, NBC Universal, CBS Corporation, or 21st Century Fox, respectively). The third attendee is a person who works for the FCC. The topic of conversation is the media/democracy paradox.

Requirements:

- Include an opening paragraph that describes the people in the conversation.
- Your paper should be formatted in a conversational format ("Me: _____," "Person #1: _____") with footnotes to explain concepts/information if they/it are/is not easily identifiable in the conversation.
- 5-6 pages single-spaced (including footnotes)
- use at least four articles from class and at least three other outside sources as support for your assertions
- A thesis statement is still a part of this paper. Integrate your main argument into the conversation.

Grading criteria: sound reasoning, quality of sources, conversational flow, formatting – sources in footnotes, conversational format, includes appropriate elements to demonstrate the media/democracy paradox

Some notes about conversational writing (taken directly from Art Young, Clemson University, <http://people.clemson.edu/~apyoung/conversationalwriting/conversational-interactive.html>): The Middle Ground between personal, expressive writing and public, academic writing is Conversational and Interactive Writing. Conversational writing is one way for novices in a discipline to learn to write, think, theorize, contextualize, and solve problems like professionals in a discipline. Conversational writing assumes a relatively safe and engaged audience of classmates and teachers. Although conversational writing does have greater demands than freewrites or personal notes, it doesn't have as rigorous expectations as a critical essay meant for publication or for summative evaluation by a teacher. In some ways, conversational writing is a middle ground between informal writing and formal writing, between "low stakes" writing and "high stakes writing."

Conversational Writing exists in the rhetorical space between personal and public writing, neither the unexamined personal response nor the carefully crafted public presentation. Conversational written discourse exhibits many characteristics of oral conversation: it's interactive, context dependent, reality based, rapid, colloquial, personal, audience-specific, and mutually enabling in order to move a conversation forward. We see such interactive writing in the oral and written conversation among scholars, generating multiple and enriching interpretations.

If you're interested in writing conversationally, here are some ideas that might help.

1. **Listen to yourself talk.** You can't write like you talk unless you know how that sounds. You have to develop an ear for your speech, which means paying attention to your speech. Listen to yourself as you talk to others (I know, this can be distracting and lead to some bad conversations). How do you open a conversation? How do you structure your sentences? What kind of words do you use often? Do you speak according to proper grammar, or do you break the rules? Do you use slang? Does it change depending on who you're talking to?
2. **Listen to others talk.** It's helpful also to learn the speech patterns of others, not just yourself. And listen to real-life people, not people in movies or television — you want real conversation patterns, not the patterns that screenwriters write. Ideally the two should be the same, but they aren't always. I like to eavesdrop or people watch to get good samples of real-life conversation.
3. **Read good conversational writing.** Find good writers who write conversationally, and study their writing patterns and the phrases and words they use. I'm not the only example — many good blogs use this style, as do many good novelists and columnists.
4. **Write as if you're talking to a close friend.** My favorite writing tip comes from Kurt Vonnegut, who advised writers to have a specific reader in mind, and write as if you're talking to that person. His ideal reader was his sister. Who is yours? If you are talking to the world in general, you'll probably write more like a speech, rather than like a conversation.
5. **Address the reader directly.** Instead of writing in third person or to a general audience, you should speak one-on-one with the reader. Note that I said "you should" rather than "a writer should" or "one should". When you speak to someone, you usually speak to him/her directly (although third-person sentences can also be used in conversation).
6. **Talk in your head as you write.** By this I mean say it out loud, to your mind's ear. You should hear your writing as you're putting pen to paper or pounding away on the keyboard. You could do this by actually saying the words out loud, with your mouth, but I find that method distracting — it's much better to have a voice in your head. Good writers often have several voices speaking in their heads. It's why they're so crazy.
7. **Eliminate formalities.** Conversational speech doesn't follow the rules of formal writing. You can start a sentence with "and" or "but" ... you can have run-on sentences from time-to-time, and use ellipses. You can end sentences with prepositions (I do it all the time). I'm not saying you should abandon the rules of grammar altogether, but if faced with a choice between proper grammar and sounding conversational, I will choose conversational. It should be a conscious choice — don't just ignore the rules, but break them for good reasons.
8. **But don't be too informal.** There's informal and then there's slang. Uhs and ums aren't appropriate in writing. Proper punctuation is much easier to read than sentences without punctuation or capitalization.
9. **Read it out loud when you're done.** After you've written a paragraph, or an entire piece (a post, a chapter, a story), read it aloud. Hear how it sounds when spoken, not just by your mind's voice, but by your mouth's voice.
10. **If it sounds stilted, change it.** When you read it aloud (or in your head as you're writing), and you hear something that sounds stilted, go back and change it. Make it flow better, make it sound more casual, make it more like speech.

Media & Democracy Media/Democracy Paradox Assignment Rubric

- ☐ Fundamental conflict between commercial interests and the public interest, between private interests and the interests of a democracy
 - ☐ Commercially funded media cannot fully pursue their economic self-interests without harming optimal public service
- ☐ Concept of the public interests legitimates state intervention because communications is an essential form of infrastructure
- ☐ Characteristics of capitalism: 1) class and inequality, 2) monopoly or oligopoly, 3) endless drive to develop new tech to increase productivity
- ☐ Regulation has privileged commercial broadcasting; media systems are always the result of government policies and subsidies
- ☐ PEC evaluates media and communication systems by determining how they affect political and social power in society and whether they are for or against democracy and successful self-government; also how communication defines social existence and shapes human development

	Sound reasoning – includes appropriate elements to demonstrate the media/democracy paradox	Sources	Thesis	Conversational flow, conversational format, formatting
4	Outline details all elements above and writing shows student completely understands concepts.	Student includes at least four articles from class and at least three other outside sources and all are credible.	Student advances a clear argument about the media/democracy paradox.	Conversational discourse is totally interactive, audience-specific, and mutually enabling. Formatting (in-text citations and footnotes) is all correct.
3	Outline details most of the elements above and writing shows student mostly understands concepts.	Student includes 2-3 articles from class and/or less than three other outside sources. OR One or two sources are not credible.	Student advances an argument about the media/democracy paradox, but it may not be clear.	Conversational discourse is mostly interactive, audience-specific, and mutually enabling. Formatting (in-text citations and footnotes) is mostly correct.
2	Outline includes some of the elements above OR writing does not show understanding of topics.	Student includes 0-1 articles from class and/or less than three other outside sources. OR Three or four sources are not credible.	Student advances an argument about the ad, but it is not clear.	Conversational discourse is somewhat interactive, audience-specific, and mutually enabling. Formatting (in-text citations and footnotes) is somewhat correct.
1	Outline does not include many elements from above OR writing is not clear.	Student includes no articles from class and/or no other outside sources. OR Four or more sources are not credible.	Student does not advance an overall argument about the media/democracy paradox.	Conversational discourse is not very interactive, audience-specific, or mutually enabling. Formatting (in-text citations and footnotes) has a lot of issues.

Comments:

Media firms in the United States operate primarily as commercial firms which puts them in tension with the democratic goals of the media (Picard, 2005). In a capitalist system commercial media firms have a main goal of making as much money as they can. This is in tension with the media's role in democracy of providing diverse content, mobilizing the public, serving the needs of different social groups, and ensuring that information is reputable (Picard, 2005). The capitalism driving commercial firms, and democracy, are inherently in tension with each other thus creating the Media vs. Democracy paradox currently present in the United States. This paper will explore this paradox through a dialogue. The conversation will be between 3 people and I, a worker from an important consulting company. I will be facilitating and participating in the conversation. A worker from the FCC, an avid NBC news consumer, and an officer from the NBCUniversal news corporation are the other participants. So you know who is talking each response will be labeled as “Me, FCC, NBC viewer, of NBCUniversal” respectively. Through this dialogue I argue that commercial mass media and democracy are incompatible.

Me: Welcome everyone to dinner, it is nice to meet you all. Today I will be facilitating and participating in a conversation about the media and democracy paradox. Before we start, I would like everyone to share a little bit about who they are and why they are here.

NBC Viewer: Well, I guess I better start so I don't have to follow up these hot shots. I am a middle class American from North Mankato, Minnesota. I am here because I rely on media, specifically NBC news, to keep me informed on news locally, nationally, and globally. This information helps me to make decisions on how I live my life.¹

NBCUniversal: Thank you for choosing us. I am an Officer at NBCUniversal. We are one of the nation's largest media conglomerates.² Our business provides more than just the broadcast TV service mentioned by the viewer. We also provide top notch cable networks, cable communications³, filmed entertainment⁴, and theme parks for consumers.

FCC: And I am the person who makes sure they stay in line. I work for the Federal Communications Commission (FCC)⁵ which is tasked with regulating the interstate and international communications by radio, television, wire, cable, and satellite throughout the United State. We do this in order to promote competition and support the economy.⁶

¹ Media is expected to include a wide range of information, opinions, and perspective that mobilize the public to carry out their responsibilities in society and encourage participation in local, state, and national affairs (Picard, 2005).

² In 2016 Comcast, the parent company of NBCUniversal, brought in over 80 Billion dollars in revenue (Comcast, 2017)

³ Providing video, high-speed internet and voice services to residential users (Comcast, 2017)

⁴ Operations of Universal Pictures, DreamWorks, Illumination and Focus Feature produced and distributed filmed entertainment worldwide (Comcast, 2017).

⁵ Founded in 1927 as the Federal Radio Commission and in 1934 the FCC was charged with the oversight of wired and wireless communications (Horwitz, 2005).

⁶ <https://www.fcc.gov/about-fcc/what-we-do>

Me: Great, thank you all for coming. As you all know we will be discussing the media and democracy paradox⁷ which compromises the quality of news media.

NBC viewer: Wait... what do you mean it compromises the quality of the news media? I get that media isn't giving me the best information, but how does the media democracy paradox cause this questionable quality?

Me: Well, let me tell you. Capitalism⁸ in the media systems promotes inequality, selfishness, corruption and commercialism (McChesney, 2015). The effect of these goals is that media cannot perform the functions it needs to to support democracy.⁹ To fully support democracy, media firms must check their self interests or have regulatory commissions that force them to do so (Picard, 2005).

NBC Viewer: You explained the paradox more... and why it might compromise the quality of the media but not so much about the actual implications of how it impacts my media. Can you say more about the actual effects?

Me: Oh yes. One consequence is that the media becomes more homogeneous. Much of the news media comes from the same source and is just repackaged (Picard, 2005). This lack of diversity in the media leads to depoliticization¹⁰ and apathy because there is little debate in the news.

NBC Universal: I don't know what you are talking about that news content is homogeneous. We produce our own media.

Me: That may be, but because of media conglomeration, large firms like NBC tend to produce their information from a similar ideology¹¹ of news as other large firms (Picard, 2005). Limiting the representation of society outside of the mainstream.¹² This can be attributed to deregulation¹³ of the media by the government.

NBC Universal: Woah woah woah, I see what your saying but the media needs to be free from the government. That's how it has always been and how it should be (McChesney, 2015). Capitalism is the best way to run media because competition secures public interest.¹⁴

⁷ The media democracy paradox, described simply, is between self serving capitalism in inherently in tension with a public serving democracy (McChesney, 2015).

⁸ Capitalism is a system where a free market determines prices based on supply and demand. There is competition and no coercion and the competition produces the best result for the consumer (McChesney).

⁹ Media functions that support democracy include, wide variety of content, mobilize the public to be active citizens, and serve the needs of different social groups (Picard, 2015).

¹⁰ Depoliticization is the decrease of democratic engagement activities like voting.

¹¹ Ideologies are practices and modes of thought that present aspects of human existence that are historical and changeable as eternal and unchangeable (Picard, 2005).

¹² Media conglomerate ideology tends to focus on the visible occurrences and debates among easily accessible political figures and ignore those outside of that area (Picard, 2005).

¹³ Deregulation is the removal of constraints placed on businesses by the government (Horwitz, 2005).

¹⁴ This line of thinking is part of the summary of principles of Capitalism so it makes sense that an officer from a corporation would hold this view.

FCC: Well that's not exactly true. The government used to regulate the Media a lot more through the FCC. We had much stronger limitations until the Telecommunications act of 1996¹⁵ (Horwitz, 2005).

NBC Universal: Well maybe it hasn't always been how it is now but the competition of a free market¹⁶ still produces the best outcome for me and for the public.

NBC Viewer: I agree, I value the freedom of capitalism and I think the news and entertainment I get from NBC is great.

Me: I suppose in theory competition perpetuated by a free market would produce the best outcome, but capitalism is naturally tends toward eliminating competition and tending toward monopoly¹⁷

FCC: That is an example of where the FCC comes into play, we would never let that happen because there are still laws against monopoly.¹⁸ We regulate firms to ensure that there remains competition.

Me: Yes that is a fair point, but there is little being done to prevent an oligopoly¹⁹ which creates the same problem of limited competition (McChesney, 2015).

NBC Viewer: Well now you are just making up words... what is oligopoly?

Me: Oligopoly is a system where a small number of firms dominate a market such that they can set the price (McChesney, 2015). Much like the large media conglomerates in the United States.²⁰

FCC: Yes unfortunately oligopoly is very present in the United states due to the continuing deregulation of media. In broadcast news specifically media ownership deregulations has been steady. At first one firm was only able to own three stations, then five, then twelve, and now after the Telecommunications Act of 1996 we allow ownership of up to 35% of a market.²¹

Me: And this oligopoly is harmful to the media competition and American public.

NBCUniversal: Woah don't be too subtle, I'm right here! We provide an important service to the American public and are very successful on behalf of our investors.

¹⁵ The Telecommunications act of 1996 relaxed or eliminated laws regulating broadcasting and cable (Horwitz).

¹⁶ Free market is an economic system where producers and consumers make transactions with minimal intervention from the government (Mcchesney).

¹⁷ The drive to increase profits results in the natural elimination of competition to increase market control (Mcchesney).

¹⁸ Pure Monopoly is when one company controls 100% of a part of a market but a monopoly can be any situation where a company owns enough of a market to set the price (Mcchesney).

¹⁹ The government regulates markets to prevent monopoly but Oligopoly. Oligopoly is when a handful of firms dominate an industry and set the price Mcchesney.

²⁰ Find site talking about oligopoly in USA

²¹ Regulatory restrictions on broadcast televisions to 3 stations in 1940, 5 station in 1953, 12 stations in 1984, and 35% market reach in 1996 (Noam, (nd)).

NBC Viewer: Yes I have enjoy NBC so much I invested much of my pension into stock²² in Comcast, the parent company of NBCUniversal.

NBC Universal: And we have been doing quite well, making over 6 Billion in income last year from just our broadcast segment.²³

Me: That's great. Good for you, but that doesn't just nullify the fact that in an oligopoly the market is regulated by a few powerful firms, not competition in a free market (Mcchesney).

NBCUniversal: Well what could make it better? To just have the government regulate everything? Society works best when businesses are running things and there very little government intervention (McChesney, 2015).²⁴

FCC: Well that's not exactly true. The government is what sets up laws making the profit system work. Examples are copyright laws²⁵ and setting terms of trade (McChesney, 2015).

NBC Viewer: Wait can we go back? How did NBCUniversal make over 6 billion in income last year?

NBC Universal: Actually, most of it comes from advertising especially with our broadcast television segment²⁶

NBC Viewer: Oh yes. I love the news but hate the commercials.

NBC Universal: Although many people don't like advertisements, customers determine the products offered in the market depending on what they want.²⁷

Me: So what do you advertise?

NBC Universal: Well actually, we do a lot of advertising for things that we are associated with through Comcast.²⁸

Me: That sounds like a good example of how the media controls the wants of the public through advertising. Through advertising, capitalists are able to dictate what the public wants, therefore controlling what they can sell (Mcchesney, 2015).

²² The primary holders of stock in media companies are banks, investment houses and specifically pension funds (Picard, 2005).

²³ SEC 10K COMCAST

²⁴ This is a better example of neoliberal thinking. Which means society is better off when business are running the economy with little intervention from the government (Mcchesney, 2015).

²⁵ Copyright laws allow companies to monopolize content and continue to make money on it and not allow others to use it (Mcchesney, 2015).

²⁶ In broadcast TV segment, 6.8 billion from advertising and 1.9 billion from content licensing and 1.4 from distribution and other (Comcast, 2017). The content licensing relates to copyright laws.

²⁷ This comes from the catechism of capitalism in media. That capitalism depends on the assumption that consumers decide what the producers are making (Mcchesney, 2015).

²⁸ Comcast also has cable communications, cable networks, filmed entertainment, and theme park segments of the corporation (Comcast, 2017). They can advertise their theme parks, cable services, and movies for example.

NBC Viewer: woah really? That's really not cool. I knew I didn't like those advertisements.

NBC Universal: Ugh! Well this is just the way it is and it's not going to change so get used to it! Are we ever going to order?

NBC Viewer: Yeah that is what I was wondering, not if we are going to order, but rather, if this system doesn't work... Why is it the system?

Me: Very good question indeed.

FCC: Yes, that is an interesting question people rarely think about. It has to do with some things we already talked about like The Telecommunications Act of 1996 and oligopolies. In the past we had much stronger laws creating a different system.²⁹ Those old laws could no longer work as new media systems developed like the internet.³⁰ This law deregulated much of the media market and gave rise to oligopolies that are too big to walk back now. Also, Public ownership continues to drive the conglomerates to be profit focused.

Me: Very good point. The fact that our system is one that is inherently in conflict with itself is hard to understand. That said, it is important to understand what the conflicts are in order to recognize the faults of media. Thank you for this conversation, I think now it's time to eat!

NBC Viewer: Wait!! Does it always have to stay this way? What can we do to change it?

NBCUniversal: Nothing, shoot! Should we order some drinks?

Me: Well I think there are things that we could do. The government always has the potential to implement policies that benefit the public at the expense of those at the top but that is especially tricky in the United States because of private property laws and the first amendment (Mcchesney).

FCC: Yes, although it will be difficult because of the current power structure, it is possible that we at the FCC could move back toward structural regulations rather than current regulations that are more focused on content (Horwitz). There seems to be growing public anxiety about the decline of media regulation.³¹

Me: This seems like enough for tonight. Thank you all for coming. This conversation has shown that the current media system and democracy are incompatible because of the self serving nature of capitalism, advertising, and the current oligopolies. That said there is still hope for a future where the FCC returns to its role in regulating the structural aspects of the media system with the support of the public. Now let's eat!

²⁹ Old laws prohibited broadcast stations from affiliation with an entity that maintained more than one network, prohibited the ownership of more than one station in the same broadcast service, and could only own one television station in a market (Horwitz, 2005).

³⁰ The development of new media made the laws mentioned above inapplicable to some media sources which created the need for change (Horwitz, 2005).

³¹ There was great public outcry over the FCC's 2003 efforts to relax its ownership limits (Horwitz, 2005).

Works cited

Comcast.(2017) *Comcast. Annual Report*. Retrieved from:

<https://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/902739/000119312514047522/d666576d10k.htm>

Horwitz, R. B. (2005). *The press* (pp. 284-302). New York: Oxford University Press.

McChesney, R. W. (n.d.). Preface to the 2015 edition. In *Rich Media, Poor Democracy* (2015 Edition ed., pp. Xxxvii-Lvii). The New Press.

McChesney, R. (n.d.). The Media/ Democracy Paradox. In *Rich Media, Poor Democracy* (2015 Edition ed., pp. 1-11). The New Press.

McChesney, R. (n.d.). How Can the Political Economy of Communication Help Us Understand the Internet? In *Rich Media, Poor Democracy* (2015 Edition ed., pp. 63-95). The New Press.

McChesney, R. (n.d.). Does Capitalism Equal Democracy? In *Rich Media, Poor Democracy* (2015 Edition ed., pp. 23-62). The New Press.

Noam, E. (n.d.). Media Concentration in the United States:. Retrieved November 02, 2017, from <http://www.vii.org/papers/medconc.htm>

Picard, R. G. (2005). *The press* (pp. 337-350). New York: Oxford University Press.

What We Do. (2017, July 10). Retrieved November 02, 2017, from

<https://www.fcc.gov/about-fcc/what-we-do>