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## Media Ownership and the Political Economy of Research in US Media Policymaking

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### Introduction

In United States media policy, issues of media pluralism and diversity have been tightly intertwined with the issue of media ownership. In the US, the media ownership issue involves not only concerns about ownership concentration and its anti-competitive effects in the economic marketplace and in the marketplace of ideas; but also concerns about the levels of media ownership amongst historically disadvantaged groups such as women and minorities. In this regard, then, the media ownership issue in the US becomes interconnected with pluralism and diversity-related concerns about a robust marketplace of ideas and minority and gender representation in both the structure and content of the media system. And, of course, these social and political dimensions coexist with economic concerns about the relationship between the ownership structure of media markets and the economic functioning of these markets. From a policy standpoint, all of these concerns need to be addressed within a media environment that has, over the past two decades, been in a period of tremendous volatility and ongoing technological change.

As should be clear, the media ownership issue represents a complex interplay of policy concerns within an industry context that is far from stable. It stands to reason, then, that the primary media policy-making body in the US – the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) – has, since 1996, been mandated by the US Congress to evaluate and to adjust as necessary its media ownership policies every four years. It also stands to reason that, given the complexity of the media ownership issue, these policymakers would want their process of evaluating these media ownership policies to be well informed by relevant research.

And, beginning in 2001, we see what appears to be an increased commitment by policymakers to conducting and utilising research in the evaluation of US media ownership policies. The then Federal Communications Commission Chairman Michael Powell initiated in 2002 what he described as the ‘most comprehensive look at media ownership regulation ever undertaken by the FCC’ (Federal Communications Commission, 2002, p. 1). Powell specifically emphasised the importance of developing the necessary factual record to guide the Commission’s decision making in this area. As he stated in 2001, at the beginning of the media ownership inquiry, ‘Rebuilding the factual foundation of the Commission’s media ownership regulations is one of my top priorities’ (Federal Communications Commission, 2001, p. 1). As this statement suggests, the factual foundation undergirding US media ownership regulations had fallen into a state of disrepair. Every four years since Powell’s pronouncement, research has played a prominent – and consistently controversial – role in the FCC’s media ownership proceedings.

Therefore, understanding how media ownership policy is formulated and evaluated in the US requires a detailed examination of how research is used, and perhaps even abused, in the policy-making process. The relationship between research and policymaking has received a substantial amount of academic attention (e.g. McGarity, 1991; Stone, 2001; Henig, 2009). As this literature frequently reminds us, policy research is inherently political. Naïve notions of policy decision making being dictated by objective social-scientific analysis fail to capture the more complex realities surrounding how policy research is conducted and used in the policy-making process.

There is also a less discussed economic dimension to the dynamics of policy research. Successful stakeholder participation in the policy process depends, to some extent, on the ability to conduct and inject research into the process, and to evaluate and critique the research conducted by others (Napoli and Seaton, 2007). Policymakers themselves often encounter resource constraints in this regard, and thus are forced to rely upon third parties for the data and research that guide their decision making. Here, resource imbalances in the ability to conduct and evaluate research impact the relationship between research and policymaking (Napoli and Seaton, 2007).

It is this complex political economy of policy research that this chapter explores, within the specific context of US media ownership policy. This chapter offers a critical perspective on the research–policy-making dynamic, examining a range of troubling tendencies in the relationship