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The Influence of Ownership on the Valence of Media Content: The Case of Movie Reviews

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The Influence of Ownership on the Valence of Media Content: The Case of Movie Reviews

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Abstract

Theories of political economy and resource-dependence imply that corporate ownership of the mass media biases its content so as to further the corporation's interests in particular and capitalist hegemony in general. This study directly tests the former claim, which is suggestive about the latter. Previous studies have not disentangled the effect of ownership from other factors such as advertising or ideology. Furthermore previous studies have relied on content analysis, which introduces an element of measurement error. This paper shows that contrary to expectations derived from the literature, publications do not give especially generous reviews to films distributed by their corporate parents, suggesting that ownership may not be a major source of valence bias for particular corporate interests, nor perhaps, for corporate class interests either.

The critical tradition of mass communication scholarship argues that the mass media are excessively concentrated and their contents are skewed to reflect the interests of the oligopolies who own them (Herman and McChesney, 1997). A common method for assessing media bias, in both popular and academic literature, consists of comparing observed media content to the researcher's conception of unbiased content (e.g., Lichter et al., 1994; Parenti, 1986). This approach requires the researcher to make the problematic a priori assumption of an "unbiased" benchmark, usually one reflecting reality as the researcher sees it. A more rigorous test requires a quasi-experimental design, in which media outlets exhibit variation in the predicted direction of bias, with a theoretical rationale as to why the "treatment" publication should be more biased than the "control" publication. The analysis would then compare the treatment and control.

Although less well known in the mass media literature than political economy theory, and often drawn on only implicitly, resource-dependence theory and its cousin, transaction cost economics, have more readily testable implications. These theories hold that firms will maximize control over uncertain resources, including “buzz,” by internalizing them. Therefore, an ideal quasi-experimental design estimates the effect of ownership through measuring “synergy bias” (Williams, 2002) or “plugola” (McAllister, 2002), wherein a media outlet might be expected to devote greater quantity and more glowing quality of content to the other properties of its parent corporation than do media outlets without a corporate interest in these fields. Although Williams’ application of this method avoids the trap of assuming a dubious benchmark, it relies on an unspecified form of content analysis to code valence. Content analysis of valence can be quite rigorous but remains contestable, a superior test would require the media itself to numerically code its assessment of phenomena.

Both self-coded content and natural variation in expected bias occur within the context of reviews, such as those of films, music, or restaurants. These reviews are commonly self-coded with 0-4 stars or an A-F “grade” and occasionally the products being reviewed are owned by the same company as the reviewing publication, creating variance in theoretically expected bias. I test whether or not the print divisions of conglomerates give inflated ratings to films distributed by the film divisions of their corporate parents. It follows from resource-dependence theory that newspapers will systematically give higher reviews to films in which their own conglomerate has a financial interest than to films distributed by other firms. If a company stands to profit from the success of a film, it is in its interest for that film to receive favorable reviews so that it might attract a large audience (Hirsch, 1972). If that same company owns a newspaper that publishes film reviews it would be in that company’s (short-term) interest to exert its influence so that its film gets a good review.

The null hypothesis, i.e., that reviews with a conflict of interest are no more generous than others, is plausible, however. Indeed, there are strong reasons to expect no effect. First, firms may perceive it to be in their long-run interest to refrain from aggressively shaping content. A firm that issued internal memos demanding good reviews for its films, or fired uncooperative reviewers, would be very likely to see these practices publicized and suffer public ill will, dishonor among field peers, a loss of circulation, and increased regulatory scrutiny before its next acquisition. Second, notions of professional integrity among print media staff, including film reviewers, may favor autonomy (Demers, 1998). Writers may value their independence, and actively avoid favoring their firm’s films, perhaps even overcompensating and ranking them lower. Third, the transaction costs may exceed the marginal benefits of micro-managing the firm’s various holdings.[1] Thus for these three reasons, strong means of ensuring praise of a company’s films are unlikely. Any effect more likely occurs through more subtle means. Ethnographic research has found that self-selection to like-minded periodicals and gentle socialization reconcile the prima fasciae conflict between management control and journalist professionalism (Sigelman, 1973). For example, a company may hire reviewers with a taste for the conglomerate’s films or reviewers may try to please their employers without explicit prompts.

[1]In personal communication (March, 2001), Michael Medved, who was the *Post*’s chief film critic from 1993 to 1998, stated that News Corp is a newspaper company that happens to own a film studio and most divisions of the company are oblivious to the existence of Fox.

Even if the resource-dependence hypothesis is correct and movie reviews are demonstrably subject to conflict of interest pressure, a political economist might reasonably question the importance of this relationship. First, if consumers rely on the media to provide unbiased information about products, it is important to see if this trust is violated. Indeed, this is one of the prime concerns the state and consumer groups have about conglomeration.[2] Second, most analyses of the political economy of the mass media tackle the considerably more dramatic charge that the corporate media legitimates global capitalism. Although it is problematic to generalize, an examination of how the media covers its own commercial interests can be suggestive for theories of hegemony, which are methodologically difficult to test directly. By studying a situation that parallels hard news, this paper consciously sacrifices some generalizability for the sake of validity.

1 Literature Review

In the first edition of *The Media Monopoly* in 1983, Bagdikian lamented that fifty firms controlled the bulk of the mass media. More recent editions narrow that number to five (Bagdikian, 2004). However, one ought to note that Bagdikian arguably exaggerates both the extent and rate of change in concentration (Compaine and Gomery, 2000). According to Bagdikian, this type of corporate control leads to three major sources of bias. First, media content reflects the firms' CEOs' "highly conservative political and economic values." Second, the reliance on advertising makes the media averse to offending other firms. Third, and most relevant to this study, conflicts of interest can bias reporting on the firm's other interests. However, while Bagdikian provides strong evidence of the independent variable (conglomeration), he has minimal evidence of the dependent variable (corporate and class bias), and fairly little evidence of a causal link between the two.

Resource-dependence and transaction cost theories argue that decisions about vertical integration are fundamentally about managing risk. In the manufacturing industries where the theories originated, components or raw materials upstream may be sold to another customer and downstream sales organizations may switch another supplier, depriving the firm of the ability to, respectively, make and sell its products. Cultural industries are distinct from many other industries in that they are characterized by "superstar" or "hit" markets where products success follows an inverse power distribution (Rosen, 1981). This gives perceptions of a product's desirability a massively non-linear effect on its success and makes promotion the critical scarce resource for cultural products (Hirsch, 1972; Neuman, 1991). Whereas a computer manufacturer is primarily concerned with access to such tangible resources as LCDs, a media firm ought to be most concerned about supply of the ethereal commodity "buzz." To this effect "stu-

[2] Hickey, Neil. 2000. "Coping with Mega-Mergers." *Columbia Journalism Review* 38: 16-20. Miller, Mark C. 1999. "Can Viacom's Reporters Cover Viacom's Interests." *Columbia Journalism Review* 38:50.

dios will often add 50% to a picture's production budget just for advertising and publicity" in an attempt to reduce the risk of the film's release (Vogel, 2007).

Although firms have reliable access to advertising in the open market, advertising is less credible, and therefore less desirable, than the opinions of allegedly impartial critics and other gatekeepers (Caves, 2000; Hirsch, 1972). This gives rise to "payola," wherein a cultural producer compensates a gatekeeper for favored treatment of its products (Coase, 1979; Rossman et al., 2008; Rossman, 2012). However, payola is a highly unreliable resource in the market since exposure would ruin the gatekeeper's reputation, and in some industries, expose the participants to prosecution. Thus in the early 1990s, media industry discourse was dominated by "synergy," which in large part was about "cross-promotion," a euphemism for making payola rather than buying it.[3] For instance, AOL Time Warner magazines and internet service promoted the first Harry Potter film (The Economist 2001) and Viacom cable and broadcast properties heavily promoted the reality game show "Survivor."[4] Conglomeration was simultaneously made desirable by the management doctrine of synergy and possible by regulatory changes, such as the end of fin-syn (which had effectively prevented movie studios from owning television stations).

The hypothesis that ownership of the media shapes its content can be tested through content analysis. In this methodology, researchers use human coders or computers to interpret media content. Depending on the study, the coding scheme can range from holistic to technical, and the analysis can focus on the quantity of coverage or its valence.

Several studies have used content analysis to test whether synergy affects media content. In some circumstances, corporate publications disproportionately cover their owners' interests, though the results are quite inconsistent (Williams, 2002). NBC television news programs devoted more coverage than did their competitors to the series finale of "Seinfeld," an NBC sitcom (McAllister, 2002). Finally, using a survey rather than content analysis, the Pew Center for the People and the Press found that many journalists believed themselves to have self-censored newsworthy problems with their company.[5]

The political economy literature is parallel to, and larger than, that on synergy. This literature, largely grounded in the Neo-Marxian tradition, but also drawing on the critical Weberian tradition, argues that the mass media pro-

[3]Synergy also refers to the capacity to fully capture all rents stemming from derived works of the product. Following the market devaluation of AOL-Time Warner, this now seems to have been an inefficient business practice. Market transactions tend to be efficient when trading partners have symmetrical information (Akerlof, 1970), or in the case of media markets, symmetrical ignorance (Caves, 2000). Therefore, licensing on the open market is more efficient as it has all of synergy's advantages but lacks its tendency to incur a deadweight loss for the firm when it entangles a viable property with a decrepit one because it discounted the costs to the viable property (Compaine and Gomery, 2000).

[4]The Economist. 2001. "Harry Potter and the synergy test: AOL Time Warner." *The Economist* (November 10, 2001, p. 87).

Lowry, Brian. 2000. "Why Are We Awash in the Soap Seas of 'Survivor'?" *Los Angeles Times* (June 13, 2000, p. F1).

[5]Lieberman, Trudy. 2000. "You Can't Report What You Don't Pursue" *Columbia Journalism Review* 39: 44-49.

mote hegemony, in part thanks to their for-profit, and especially corporate, ownership. Herman and Chomsky (1988) use a quasi-experimental quantitative content analysis design which shows that American media coverage of acts by America's enemies is more extensive and more hostile than that of similar events perpetrated by American allies. However, they never demonstrate that this biased coverage is the result of pressure from the ownership of the mass media, as compared to one of their other five "filters" or some spurious factor left unspecified by their model. Similarly, in a series of opinion columns, Cohen and Solomon (1995) describe alleged instances of conservative media bias, often arguing that interlocking boards of directors or other ties serve as a mechanism linking the interests of media firms with those of the industries they cover. Although interlocking boards are a powerful mechanism in Neo-Marxian theory for explaining how corporations attain class consciousness (Useem, 1982), they do not test this allegation, which would require systematically measuring whether media outlets with corporate ties to industry x were more favorably disposed to policies favoring industry x than were media outlets without such ties.[6]

Several other political economy content analysis studies do not suffer from this problem as their data exhibits variation in ownership or other aspects of financial interest. A study of Gannett newspapers demonstrated that newspapers in this chain tend to express less diverse editorial positions than control papers (Akhavan-Majid et al., 1991). In the 1970s, locally owned newspapers in Minnesota published far more reports of social conflict than did papers owned by chains (Donohue et al., 1985).

A pair of studies of editorial pages shows that corporate papers are more critical than locally owned papers because the former are more professional and less embedded in their local social systems. This is true both objectively – as measured by content analysis – and subjectively – as measured by a survey of politicians covered by the papers (Demers, 1996, 1998). Likewise, in the late 19th century, political patronage disappeared as a significant source of resources for newspapers as they both attracted increased advertising and became too specialized to benefit from government printing contracts (Starr, 2004). These findings suggest that the bureaucratic nature of corporate media insulates them from ownership interests and allows newsworkers' critical preferences to manifest (Lichter et al., 1986; Osiel, 1986).

Even when studies have variation in ownership, most of them have failed to adequately isolate the effect of ownership from all other factors. Eliminating spurious effects from correlates of ownership is crucial for policy purposes, because there is little point in using antitrust legislation to combat media hegemony if bias really comes not from oligopoly but advertising pressure or journalists' ideologies. A lesser problem is that content analysis necessarily introduces measurement error. This error can be minimized by using highly trained coders who are blind to the study's hypothesis and the amount of measurement error estimated through the use inter-coder reliability coefficients, although for

[6] Similarly, conservative critiques of the media focus on the party membership and ideologies of journalists (Lichter et al., 1986), but have never produced a study showing that an outlet's valence is correlated with the ideological or partisan make-up of its staff.

complex stories these coefficients can be "alarmingly low" (Crittenden and Hill, 1971).

A simple and powerful way to escape from these methodological problems is for the media outlet itself to quantitatively code the valence of its coverage of phenomena in which it either does or does not have an apparent ownership interest. Both of these conditions are met by many publications' movie reviews. The film and publication are either part of the same conglomerate or they are not, establishing the presence of direct ownership interest. And while the movie reviews themselves are subjective, the coder's interpretation of the star or letter grade portion of the review is objective, as everyone can agree that "3 stars" ought to be coded as "3 stars." While the star or grade ranking may imperfectly reflect the enthusiasm of the rest of the review, it is intrinsically socially meaningful, often appearing out of the context of the essay portion of a review. And, many consumers ignore or discount the essay portion even when it is available. To the extent that one is interested in the star or grade portion of a review per se, this can be perfectly measured, although of course improper model specification or interpretation can still mar an analysis.

Research on media conglomeration and content analysis has triangulated, but seldom shown ownership bias in the valence of media content in a methodologically convincing manner. My study statistically isolates the degree of valence bias emanating solely from ownership in mass media content, and does so without relying on content analysis.

2 Methods and Findings

To test for valence bias in film reviews I identified a list of movie reviews and coded them for a variety of characteristics. My population framing procedure ensured a matching of reviewers with similar publication markets but variation in conglomerate ownership. My coding included the existence of a review, the value of a review, and some traits of the films and reviewers. My modeling approach begins with bivariate comparisons and then employs multivariate, fixed-effects estimations of media bias. In a supplementary analysis, I examine reviews before and after a merger that created a conflict of interest.

2.1 Data

At the moment only two corporations have appreciable English-language holdings in both film and periodicals (Compaine and Gomery, 2000, pp. 482–484).[7]

[7] The major barrier to such cross-ownership was that following the end of the finance and syndication rule (finsyn), most major film companies owned television stations. Under the "one to a market" rule, the FCC requires case-by-case review for a firm to own a television station and newspaper in the same town. Thus since film studios tend to own television stations it is legally difficult for them to own papers. In 2003, the FCC proposed eliminating this rule, but the 3rd Circuit Court issued an injunction in Prometheus v. FCC that preserved the rule pending further discussion. Thus as of this writing, cross-ownership of film and print remains the same as it was in 1998 in both a de jure and a de facto sense.

News Corporation owns Fox and *The New York Post* and Time Warner owns Warner Brothers, New Line, and *Entertainment Weekly*. In order to estimate bias for both of these conglomerates, I gather reviews of Time Warner and Fox films released from 1996 through 1998.

Thus my study focuses on films, newspapers, and magazines owned by Time Warner and News Corporation. For controls I also include in my data frame comparable periodicals owned by companies without film interests: *The New York Daily News* and *USA Today*. *The Daily News* and *The New York Post* are both daily New York tabloids. *Entertainment Weekly* and *Reel Views* are both nationally circulated weeklies devoted specifically to the entertainment industry. *Reel Views* is independently operated by the hobbyist James Bernardinelli, who, according to the well-known commercial critic Roger Ebert, is "the best of the Web-based critics."[8] However, whereas *Entertainment Weekly* is a major commercial print magazine heavily dependent on advertising, *Reel Views* is a moderate size hobbyist's website that does not carry advertisements. While the medium is quite different, *Reel Views* more closely matches *EW*'s target demographic and coverage of films than any codable print publication I could discover. To address the difference of medium, I include the nationally circulated daily newspaper *USA Today* as a further control.

The control periodicals are immune to ownership pressure but — with the exception of *Reel Views* — vulnerable to advertising pressure, since movie advertisements are a major source of revenue for newspapers. Furthermore, as the control publications represent comparable markets to the two periodicals owned by film conglomerates, within my dataset regional film release dates do not covary with conflict of interest. This holds constant any potential selection effects from limited release films or news cycles.

My publication data frame consists of the following sources: *Entertainment Weekly (EW), The New York Post (Post), Reel Views, USA Today, and The New York Daily News (Daily News).* The comparative statistics for each publication are provided in Table 2.1. Aside from ownership, the most relevant distinction between the publications is that *USA Today* reviewed fewer films than the other publications. Each periodical has a roughly normal review score distribution.

For my film population frame I use films distributed domestically by the two theoretically relevant conglomerates. I therefore use the Internet Movie Database to select all films released by Time Warner and NewsCorp (Fox) in 1996, 1997, and 1998 (table 2.2). Unfortunately, the IMDB only allows queries by initial release date, not by first American release date. So as some foreign films in the population were not released in the United States until after 1998, there is a slight discrepancy between target population and data frame.

Table 2 summarizes the film level data, collapsing them by conglomerate. Warner Brothers films tend to get lower reviews than Fox films, but the average for both companies is about two and a half stars. The two distributors receive

[8] Ebert, Roger. 2001. "Comic actors can't save 'Silverman.'" *Chicago Sun-Times* (February 9, 2001, p.33).

Table 1. Summary of Publications (as of 1996)

Publication	Owner	Owned by Film Company?	% of Films in Sample Reviewed	*M* Review	*SD* Review
Entertainment Focused Weeklies					
Entertainment Weekly	Time Warner	Y	88.5	2.3	1.0
Reel Views[a]	James Bernardinelli	N	87.4	2.6	0.7
NY Daily Tabloids					
The New York Post	News Corp (Fox)	Y	88.9	2.4	0.9
The New York Daily News	Daily News	N	90.0	2.3	0.8
Urban Midwestern Papers					
The Kansas City Star	Disney[b]	Y	66.3	2.5	0.6
Columbus Dispatch	Columbus Dispatch	N	62.2	2.4	0.6
National Daily Newspapers					
USA Today	Gannett	N	77.0	2.4	0.7

[a] Reel Views is operated by James Bernardinelli, a hobbyist who posts movie reviews to the internet. His reviews are available at http://movie-reviews.colossus.net

[b] In 1997 Disney sold *The Star* to Knight Ridder, which has no film interests.

comparable age appropriateness ratings from the Motion Picture Association of America, suggesting that neither of the film conglomerates specializes to any great extent in producing films for a particular age group.

The review data frame is the product of the publication and film vectors. I collected data from Lexis-Nexis on *USA Today* and the *Daily News*. *Entertainment Weekly* and *Reel Views* have archives on their own respective websites. However, for the relevant years, the Post is only available on microfilm. In those instances where a publication reviewed a film multiple times, only the first review was coded.

2.2 Analysis

I assess media bias through "conflict of interest," which is when the same company owns a publication and a film being reviewed by that publication. Bias is present if conflict of interest leads to a film being reviewed more generously than it would be otherwise.

The key independent variable is "conflict of interest." For all reviews where the critic's publication is part of the same conglomerate as the distributor of the film being reviewed, conflict is scored as a 1, and zero otherwise. So since Time Warner owns both *Entertainment Weekly* and New Line — which distributed "The Island of Dr. Moreau" — *EW*'s review of "Dr. Moreau" is coded with conflict as "1." But the *Post*'s review of the same film is coded "0," since the

Table 2. Summary of Films (1996-1998), by Distributor	Time Warner	Fox	Disney	All Films
Mean Critical Rating[a]	2.3	2.6	2.6	2.4
Financial Success				
Mean Box Office Return (Millions of $)	26.5	40.0	26.3	29.7
Median Box Office Return (Millions of $)	13.1	18.8	12.75	13.0
% "Blockbusters"[b]	10.7	7.8	12.1	10.4
MPAA Rating[c]				
% rated G	2.9	1.6	7.6	3.7
% rated PG	13.6	10.9	15.2	13.3
% rated PG-13	26.4	31.3	24.2	27.0
% rated R	55.0	56.3	51.5	54.4
% rated NC-17 or unrated	2.1	0.0	1.5	1.5
N	140	64	66	270

[a] Mean critical rating is the average of all reviews of all films in the sample distributed by the company.
[b] "Blockbusters" are films earning over $100,000,000 in first-run domestic theatrical release.
[c] The Motion Picture Association of America is the movie industry's trade group and issues quasi-legal age appropriateness ratings of films. The ratings are arranged here from most to least innocuous.

Post is owned by News Corp, which did not distribute that film.

For control variables I use fixed effects for film and publication. Except for the reference category, each film and each publication has its own dichotomous variable. The publication fixed effects control for the fact that some publications tend to give higher reviews than others. Likewise, the film fixed effects control for some films being generally regarded as of superior quality than others. Therefore the relevant comparison is not whether *Entertainment Weekly* gives higher reviews to Warner Brothers, New Line, and Fine Line films than to other films, nor whether these films receive higher reviews in *EW* than other periodicals. Rather, the appropriate question is whether *EW*, by its own standards, is more generous to these films than are other publications by theirs.

While it is likely that factors such as advertising, genre, and the director's prestige do predict film reviews, the additive impact of these factors are completely captured by the fixed effect for each film and each publication. It is nearly impossible for any "conflict of interest" effect to be either spurious or suppressed since it is difficult to conceive of a variable that is correlated with conflict of interest, but not with reviewer (which defines publisher, publication format, distribution area, etc.) or film (which defines studio, budget, advertising budget, genre, etc.). That is, even if critics are fond of big budgets, this effect is entirely captured by the film dummy by which it would be defined. And of course "Space Jam" has the same production budget whether it is reviewed by the *USA Today* or the *New York Post*.

My analysis evaluates whether there is valence bias in movie reviews. As such, the dependent variable is "review score," the number of stars or letter grade portion of a review. It is coded 0 through 4, corresponding to the number of stars, with fractional scores coded as such. If there was no review or the review lacked stars and was thus uncodable, it is coded with a missing data flag. As *EW* uses letter grades instead of stars, I convert its reviews on a standard GPA scale, where "A" equals four and "F" equals zero, with pluses or minuses counting as three-tenths.

The simplest way to assess valence bias is a t-test of means comparing reviews with and without conflict of interest. The difference of 2.43 for non-conflict reviews versus 2.40 for conflict reviews is negligible to the eye and statistically insignificant by a wide margin, a t of 0.57 with 1,396 degrees of freedom, which implies a one-tailed p of 0.72. However, it might be that an effect is suppressed if we assume that the control publications have slightly lower review means than the conglomerate publications. Regression analysis can unpack and control for such factors.

For my OLS regression of review score, I model first the fixed effects for publication and film only, then conflict of interest together with the fixed effects, as shown in table 3

Table 3. OLS Regression of Review Score (N=1513)

	Model 1 film and publication fixed effects	Model 2 conflict and film and publication fixed effects
conflict of interest B		0.06
conflict of interest se		0.05
conflict of interest p>t		0.22
film fixed effects p>F	0.000	0.000
publication fixed effects p>F	0.002	0.001

Note. R2 = .556 for Model 1; R2 = .557 for Model 2.

The strongest predictors of review score are the fixed effects for film and publication, together they account for a majority of the variance. The fixed effects for film in particular are powerful predictors, with F-tests significant at the .001 level in all models, demonstrating that there is to a very large extent a critical consensus as to which films are good and which are bad. This is not surprising or controversial though; the effect of conflict of interest is of more theoretical interest. As we recall from the t-test, conflict of interest by itself has no effect on review score. When examined net of the effect of film and publication in model 2, the effect of conflict becomes positive, but remains statistically insignificant. This is not the result of a high standard error, but of a low coefficient. Even if it were statistically significant, one would not consider an effect that pushes the predicted value less than two percent of its range and one-thirteenth of its standard deviation to be socially meaningful. Therefore the data do not support the hypothesis that ownership biases content.

2.3 Supplementary Analysis

To supplement the main analysis, which treats conflict of interest as a cross-sectional variable, I also analyze an instance where conflict of interest varies over time. In the mid 1990s, Time Warner, owner of *Entertainment Weekly* magazine, purchased Turner Broadcasting Systems, owner of New Line cinema. Prior to August, 1995, when Time Warner publicly offered to buy Turner, *EW* critics faced no conflict of interest. Following February, 1997, when the deal received final government approval, the critics found themselves in the same corporation as the films they were reviewing. As during the intervening period it was ambiguous whether New Line was meaningfully part of Time Warner, I treat this middle period separately.

Using the IMDB, I drew a list of all films initially released from 1991 through 2002 whose American distributor was New Line. I then recorded the grade *Entertainment Weekly* awarded each of these films and when it did so. As seen in table 2.4, left-tailed t-tests show that neither during nor after the merger did *EW* become more generous to New Line films than it had been before the merger. Indeed, while the merger was under review, *EW* was notably less generous to New Line. This depression may be a fluke or it may reflect critics temporarily over-compensating for bias, either out of genuine opposition to the merger or to put on a show for regulators.

Table 4. Reviews of all New Line Films released 1991-2002

	Pre-Merger	Merger Under Review	Merger Complete
Entertainment Weekly			
Mean Score	2.44	1.97	2.46
SD Score	0.12	0.19	0.10
N	64	29	102
p (Mean < *EW* Pre-Merger Mean)	--	0.98	0.45
Control Periodical Means			
Chicago Sun-Times	2.74	2.68	2.69
Reel Views	2.52	2.61	2.57
USA Today	2.25	2.16	2.28

Hypothetically, a conflict effect could exist but fail to be apparent because it is suppressed by a concurrent decline in the quality of New Line films following the merger. However, disinterested critics at *Reel Views, USA Today*, and the *Chicago Sun-Times* did not vary their opinions of New Line films over time. Therefore we can state with confidence that *Entertainment Weekly* did not become more generous to New Line after its corporate parent bought the studio.

3 Discussion

The most important limitation of this study is that one does not necessarily know what the lack of bias in product review valence implies for the more widely discussed issue of bias in hard news valence. There is a crucial theoretical distinction between furthering the interests of a single corporation (corporate rationality) and those of corporations as a whole (classwide rationality) (Useem, 1982). Most of the literature on the political economy of the mass media is concerned with the latter, but this study only directly examines the former. If a conglomerate inflates reviews of its own film and this leads more people to see the film, that conglomerate itself will profit, so the conglomerate has exercised corporate rationality. In contrast, legitimating global capitalism is a public good, as all capitalists benefit from property rights and political stability, even if they do not contribute to shaping public opinion to favor such conditions. Thus if a media conglomerate biases its media output to favor capitalism, it has exercised classwide rationality, not corporate rationality.

Rational choice theory makes the strong theoretical prediction that, in most circumstances, actors will not contribute to a public good. However, the empirical evidence suggests that actors do contribute somewhat to public goods, just not very much. For instance, voter turnout is typically well above the theoretical prediction of zero (Green and Shapiro, 1994). Furthermore, interlocking directorships and other corporate ties may lead the corporate elite to effectively have interests aligned not so much with any particular corporation as with capital as a whole (Useem, 1982).

So the weak form of rational choice theory holds that actors contribute less to public goods than to private goods. While a capitalist very well may exert influence to insure hegemonic media content, and thus promote the interests of all capital, she should interfere even more to insure positive coverage of her own products and ventures. Since my research shows that corporations do not direct their critics to favor their films, this obliquely suggests that neither do they interfere with their journalists to ensure hard news favorable to their class interests.

Finally, ownership is just one of the possible sources of bias on mass media content. Herman and Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent* (1988) also identifies newsworker ideology, flak, advertising, and the reliance on official sources. My study is designed to isolate the direct effect of ownership, and for better or worse, does not assess the effect of any of these other factors. One can make plausible cases and find evidence for each of these other loci of distortion affecting media content one way or the other, so the aggregate impact on media content is quite uncertain. The cumulative body of research has begun to illuminate how and to what effect each of these processes affects media content, but my research shows that at least for movie reviews, ownership does not shift the valence of coverage to favor corporate interests and further suggests that ownership may not shift the valence of hard news coverage to favor class interests either.

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