

The Age of the Oligarchs: U.S Elections and Media Up for Sale

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Oil billionaires David and Charles Koch.

The concentration of power in the hands of billionaire “oligarchs” may be most alarming in places like Ukraine but the United States is moving in the same direction as wealth is consolidated at the top — and both elections and media are up for sale.

The chaos in Ukraine can be viewed, in part, as what happens when a collection of “oligarchs” – sometimes competing, sometime collaborating – take control of a society, buying most of the politicians and owning the media. The political/media classes become corrupted by serving their wealthy patrons and society breaks down into warring factions.

In that sense, Ukraine could be a cautionary tale for the United States and other countries that are veering down a similar path toward vast income inequality, with billionaire “oligarchs” using their money to control politicians and to pay for propaganda through media ventures.

Depending on your point of view, there may be “good oligarchs” and “bad oligarchs,” but the concept of oligarchy is antithetical to democracy, a system in which governance is supposed to be driven by the informed consent of the majority with respect for minority rights. Instead, we’re moving toward a competition among oligarchs with the “people” mostly as bystanders to be manipulated one way or the other.

On Wednesday, a 5-4 majority of the U.S. Supreme Court lifted limits on total amounts that an individual can contribute during a campaign cycle, an extension of the 2010 ruling on *Citizens United* allowing the rich to spend unlimited sums on political advertising. It was another step toward an American oligarchy where politicians, activists and even journalists compete to satisfy one “oligarch” or another.

Regarding political spending, that can mean the energy tycoon Koch Brothers financing the Tea Party or Americans for Prosperity to tear down government regulations of businesses. Or it can mean casino kingpin Sheldon Adelson staging his own “primary” in which Republican hopefuls compete to show who would do the most for Israel. Or – from a liberal perspective – it can be billionaire investor Tom Steyer pressing for action on man-made climate change.

On the Right, there also have been vast investments in propaganda – from books, magazines and newspapers to talk radio, TV and the Internet – by the likes of Rupert Murdoch and Richard Mellon Scaife, an imbalance countered, in only a relatively small way, by a few liberal “oligarchs” who have started their own big-budget Web sites.

And, despite the appearance of a few “left-of-center” U.S. sites, there continues to be a lock-step consensus – across the nation’s media – regarding most international conflicts, such as the recent crises in Syria and Ukraine. In those cases, these liberal “oligarchic” sites are as likely to go with the conventional wisdom as the right-wing “oligarchic” sites.

So, if you want to find critical reporting on U.S. interference in Ukrainian politics or a challenging analysis of U.S. claims about the Syrian chemical weapons attack, you’re not likely to find them at ProPublica, which is backed by ex-subprime mortgage bankers Herbert and Marion Sandler and is edited by well-paid traditional journalists from the mainstream press, like Stephen Engelberg, formerly of the New York Times. Nor at FirstLook.org funded by eBay founder Pierre Omidyar.

Though both ProPublica and FirstLook do some fine work on certain topics – such as the environment and privacy rights, respectively – they haven’t shown much willingness to get in the way of U.S. foreign-policy stampedes as they run out of control. Presumably, that would make their funders nervous and possibly put their larger business interests at risk.

Another new media “oligarch,” Washington Post owner and Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, has shied away from reining in “the neocons who brought us the Iraq War.” He has left neocons like Fred Hiatt and Jackson Diehl in charge of the opinion section of Official Washington’s hometown newspaper. Their positions on Syria and Ukraine have been predictable.

And, of course, other mainstream outlets – like the New York Times, the Daily Beast and the major TV networks – have completely fallen into line behind the conventional wisdom. Most coverage of the Syrian civil war and the Ukraine crisis couldn’t have been more submissive to the U.S. government’s propaganda themes if the stories had been written by Radio Liberty or the CIA.

Anyone looking for journalistic skepticism about the mainstream U.S. narrative on these touchy issues has had to seek out Internet sites like Consortiumnews.com which relies on mostly small donations from readers.

But the broader problem is the debilitating impact on democracy when the political/media process takes on the form of some super-hero movie in which super-human combatants do battle – crashing from building to building – while the regular humans mostly watch as powerless spectators as the chaos unfolds.

The Ukraine Mess

In Ukraine’s case, this process was telescoped in time because of the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, which was followed by the triumphal intervention of Western “free-market” advisers who descended on Kiev – as well as Moscow – with self-confident prescriptions of privatization and deregulation.

Very quickly, well-connected operatives were scoring mind-boggling deals as they gained control of lucrative industries and valuable resources at bargain-basement prices. Billionaires were made overnight even as much of the population descended to near starvation levels of poverty and despair.

In Russia, strong-willed nationalist Vladimir Putin emerged to put some brakes on this process, banishing some oligarchs like Boris Berezovsky into exile and jailing others like

Mikhail Khordorkovsky. However, in Ukraine, the oligarchs continued buying politicians and finally created a crisis of confidence in government itself.

Though public resentment of political corruption was a driving force in the large protests that set the stage for the overthrow of elected President Viktor Yanukovych on Feb. 22, the manipulation of that popular anger may end up impoverishing Ukrainians even more by entrenching oligarchic control even further.

Not only has the Washington-based International Monetary Fund moved to impose “macroeconomic reforms” that will slash spending on Ukraine’s already scant social programs, but “oligarchs” are moving to take direct control of the government.

For instance, the coup regime in Kiev appointed billionaire steel magnate Serhiy Taruta as governor of the Donetsk region in eastern Ukraine where many ethnic Russians live. Taruta quickly moved to suppress pro-Russian sentiment.

As part of the crackdown, the Kiev regime arrested Pavel Gubarev, who had called himself the “people’s governor.” Mikhail Dobkin, a pro-Yanukovych former regional governor who indicated he would seek the presidency, was arrested on sedition charges.

Governor Taruta also has called for some of the IMF’s more draconian demands to be put off until after political resistance to the new order in Kiev has faded.

“People are concerned with one thing,” Taruta told the Washington Post in a flattering [story](#) about his leadership. “If we show we can provide help and support, we will calm the situation down. Three to four months from now is the time to talk about financial reform in Ukraine.”

That would mean delaying the harshest elements of the IMF plan until after the scheduled presidential election on May 25, meaning that the voters will have already gone to the polls before they get a taste of what’s in store for them. By then, they may have another billionaire industrialist, Petro Poroshenko, as their new president. He is now the leading candidate.

According to [Forbes magazine](#), there are now about 1,600 billionaires in the world, worth a total of around \$6.6 trillion. The writing seems to be scribbled on the walls of Ukraine as well as the United States and around the globe that we are entering the Age of the Oligarchs.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, America’s Stolen Narrative, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). For a limited time, you also can order Robert Parry’s trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes America’s Stolen Narrative. For details on this offer, [click here](#).

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