Large corporations dominate the economic and political landscape. Helping cement their commanding position in both domains is a favorably disposed media. The media mold the views and opinions of Americans. They present the economic system favorably and describe it as an indispensable counterpart to the democratic political process. The media also play an important role in the sale of products and services through advertising and in the promotion of a consumption culture. The present chapter highlights the clash between a profit-seeking media and the informational needs of democracy and questions whether reduced public involvement in media markets is justified economically and politically.

9.1 The Media and Power

The media consist of hundreds of local television stations, thousands of radio stations, a few national newspapers, and numerous local papers. There is an impressive variety of magazines and just about every profession, craft, industry, occupation, hobby, interest, and leisure has a magazine. Similarly, with the advent of cable television, viewers have numerous choices, including stations specializing in news, sports, food, pets, history, travel, home repairs, finance, religion, entertainment, and different types of movies. The choices are indeed amazing. Yet when it comes to the media’s most important social function—to provide information essential to the functioning of a democracy, such as information voters need on social, political, and economic issues—there is less reason to celebrate. Notwithstanding all the advances in telecommunication technology, video and audio, satellites, and Internet communications, the news in terms of selection, analysis and
perspective provided cannot be said to exhibit commensurate progress. A crucial media dilemma in American society is the conflict between market constraints—namely, profit maximization—and the requirements of democracy for information. Market incentives and freedom to profit as discussed below do not necessarily yield high-quality, widely disseminated news coverage.

The U.S. media are primarily corporate owned, including several large multinational companies, with considerable influence over politics and government. They certainly affect legislation dealing with their own industry, such as rules of competition, ownership, and labor laws. The largest media firms have received subsidies and governmental help in the form of monopoly licenses for television and radio frequencies, monopoly cable television, and satellite television systems. Their sway over politicians arises from the fact that the media decides whether or not to present the activities, policies, and personalities of politicians to the public. Therefore, politicians court reporters by providing access and information, and they try to please media owners with favorable legislation. In part, the media’s power is derived from the fact that, on many issues, the public relies on the media for information.

The power of media owners is not limited to political issues, and it goes beyond the news. They can and do influence social and even religious issues. Media corporations determine the entertainment that tens of millions of Americans view nightly. More important yet, they practically socialize each generation through their program selection and the virtual creation of youth cultures. The lack of news diversity and the threat to democracy are of little concern to the population at large. However, there is resentment of the media’s cultural power. It is seen as a dangerous influence in that it weakens or even negates learning coming from more traditional sources, such as family and school.

### 9.2 Profitable News and Democracy

News in the United States is divided into local and national news. Local news consists primarily of reports on local crimes, local government, sports, weather, and human interest stories. National news is provided by six networks and their subsidiaries, although some require subscription to cable television. Networks other than the round-the-clock news companies provide a 30-minute evening news show. The networks also present news magazine shows where they dwell on a specific issue for a longer period than the two minutes allotted to stories on the evening news. Those shows, which have in the past decade become increasingly popular with the networks due