

## 2025 AEJMC Senior Scholar Projects

*Two Senior Scholar Projects were awarded.*

### Project 1

**Jon Bekken, Albright**

**"Revisiting Bagdikian: Media Ownership Today"**

Bekken is receiving a grant of \$4,748.50



**Jon Bekken** is professor of communications at Albright College in Reading, Pennsylvania, where he teaches media history, law, political economy and journalism. He co-edited *Radical Economics and Labor* (Routledge) and has authored dozens of scholarly articles and book chapters on the immigrant, labor and socialist press, media ownership, newsboys, the retail book industry and related topics. Bekken has written for and edited several alternative publications and produced public affairs programming on community radio.

**Abstract:** Ben Bagdikian published several editions of his *The Media Monopoly* between 1983 and 2004, exploring economic concentration in mass media ownership and its implications. Textbooks, politicians and others continue to draw upon this work (or often exaggerated summaries of it) to this day. This project aims to do three things:

- 1) Revisit the final edition of Bagdikian's book to provide empirical evidence of the state of economic concentration in the media as of its 2004 publication. Bagdikian's work was largely anecdotal, offering detailed information on the extensive holdings and operations of the leading media firms, but without clearly delineating the relevant media markets. This imprecision allowed caricatures of his argument – notably the self-evidently false claim that four or six firms control 90% of U.S. media – to take root in the academic literature and in popular discourse. Drawing upon census and industry data, this research will offer empirical evidence for the dominant position of the leading media firms in 2004 and offer a foundation for exploring developments since publication of *The New Media Monopoly*.
- 2) Document the current state of media ownership concentration and the implications for democratic discourse. I have begun work on defining the relevant markets in two conference papers, one of which was presented at AEJMC in 2021, and a published encyclopedia entry. This work, which needs to be expanded to address the overlapping ownership and control structures in online platforms, has demonstrated that ownership concentration in legacy media has grown in the two decades since Bagdikian's work. There are significant empirical and theoretical challenges to be addressed in expanding this analysis to online media.
- 3) Explore the decline in public debate over media ownership since publication of the last edition, and the implications of our evolving media system for public access to information and a robust public sphere.

## Project 2

**Melissa R. Gotlieb and Bryan McLaughlin, Texas Tech**

### **“Problematic News Consumption and Its Implications for Individual and Democratic Health: A Comparison of WEIRD Countries”**

Gotlieb and McLaughlin are receiving a grant of \$5,000.00.



**Melissa R. Gotlieb** (Ph.D., University of Wisconsin-Madison) is an associate professor of advertising in the College of Media & Communication at Texas Tech University.

Broadly, her research interests include political communication and motivational processes. More specifically, her research focuses on what drives communication practices, including news use, political talk, and the creation of user-generated content; the nature of these practices; and their relationship to civic engagement.



**Bryan McLaughlin** (Ph.D., University of Wisconsin-Madison) is an associate professor of advertising in the College of Media & Communication at Texas Tech University.

Broadly, his research interests include political communication, media effects, and social identity. More specifically, he examines how political narratives are processed and experienced by citizens and the consequences of these experiences on attitudes and political conflict.

**Abstract:** In recent years, we have witnessed a constant flow of disconcerting and controversial issues and events in the news, bringing about a state of uncertainty for some individuals. Rather than tuning out, many of these individuals have become drawn further in such that they are completely absorbed in the news, compulsively checking the news, and experiencing disruptions to daily life because of the news. We refer to this phenomenon as problematic news consumption (PNC). Our work in this area thus far has shown that individuals who exhibit severe levels of PNC are significantly more likely to experience increased stress and anxiety in their daily lives. At the same time, rather than withdrawing from public life, as we might expect according to media malaise theories, these individuals are also significantly more mobilized, engaging in higher levels of civic engagement. Combined, the findings from these two studies suggest that the long-romanticized view of the citizen watchdog, who actively monitors the news and remains in a constant state of readiness to take action on issues that matter, seems to overlook the fact that for these individuals, their relationship with the news and subsequent engagement in civic life is perhaps maladaptive. There is a need, however, to examine whether our findings are unique to the United States or whether they extend to other parts of the world. Our first step is to examine whether they extend to other Western, industrialized countries. Specifically, we will conduct a cross-country survey of those residing in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Australia, and New Zealand. Although these WEIRD countries share much in common, differences in value orientations, press freedom, and sensationalism of the news may relate to important differences in the prevalence and consequences of PNC.