

THE BIG INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION GROUPS IN THE WORLD

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Abstract

The present article addresses the form major world information and communication groups operate, based on strategies of verticalisation of activities that encompass the distinct media segments – newspapers and magazines, television and radio – and stretch to the new technologies, namely telecommunications and Internet access services. Operating through a vertical system, these groups work as a network system by establishing association or merger agreements, protocols to strengthen their commercial relations, and through interpersonal connections. Their corresponding capitals tend to disperse and their ownership is constantly changing, particularly thanks to the involvement of pension funds, which do not disregard the opportunity of alienating property whenever the profit obtained justifies it.

Both directly, thanks to the strength of their own products – “global products” that inundate the world market, and indirectly, through the influence they have on others around them, the leading information and communication groups are a decisive factor in the speeding up of the processes of naturalization, the fixing of stereotypes, and in putting on the agenda the topics that will cross through public space.

It is undeniable that the advent and massive spread of the new technologies pose a serious threat to the homogenization and the media standardization carried out by the major groups. However, there are still issues that call for moderation when analyzing this issue. Firstly, the power public authorities still detain, especially in non-democratic countries, to interrupt the circulation of contents. Secondly, the attack launched by the large information and communication groups in order to occupy online space themselves. Thirdly, the excess of information flow and the difficulty associated with the need to select and verify.

Keywords

Network; Transnationalisation; Naturalisation; Standardisation; Digitalisation

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The economic, financial, and political globalisation that marked the turn of the century had a double impact, which was felt both in terms of consumption and in terms of the functioning of the production system. At the consumption level, it standardized and homogenized lifestyles and desires, from the big city to the tiny village. At the production level, it displaced factory units: anything could be produced and commercialised anywhere on the globe.

In order to ensure the effective functioning of the system, it was necessary to overcome restraints associated with the existence of a Nation-State. On the other hand, it was essential to shift a new entrepreneurial structure based on the concentration of decision hierarchies and on the geographic dispersion of antennas, or subsidiaries, of that concentrated structure. Gradually, we witnessed the shifting of power and decision making to localities increasingly farther from those where the effect of such decisions was felt" (Klein, 2002: 492).

The media became decisive factors in the imposition/acceptance of this new order. To be able to do so, they had to adapt themselves to the new environment. They adapted through logic of concentration that followed well differentiated stages. Firstly, they created primarily national multimedia groups. That was followed by the transnationalization of invested capital. As a result, borders were dissolved.

This led to a separation between work places and decision-making places, and, finally, to the trans-sectorisation of trans-nationalized capital. Partnerships looking to pursuit the most diverse interests cropped up along with the multimedia groups, or rather, in a symbiotic relationship with them: from tourism to real estate speculation; from the sale of food products to the arms industry; from the commercialisation of data to financial management (Rebelo, 2002: 162). In that virtually dematerialised mesh, it was the media's job to contribute to an increase in demand¹. But it was also their role to contribute to the development of public opinion trends that would generate new

¹ "The role of TF1 is to help Coca-Cola to sell its product" admitted Patrick Le Lay, former president of that French television channel, quoted by the news agency *France Presse*, in a newscast dated 9 July 2004. The same leader added: "However, for a message to be apprehended, it is necessary that the brain of the viewer is available. Our broadcasts aim to make it available, by amusing him, and making it feel rested. What we sell *Coca Cola* is the human brain's available time".



business opportunities. And, furthermore, it was their responsibility to act as currency when the strategy of companies depended on political decisions.

STRATEGIES

1. Vertical Management

Currently, the great media groups are in vertical management and, frequently, are in a predominant position in the most diverse sectors connected to information and communication. The French group *Bouygues*, for example, holds the majority of stock in *TF1*, the French largest generalist television channel, in terms of audience. In 1989, it started a news channel, *LCI*. Six years later, it purchased an important company that produced television entertainment programs, *Glen*. In 1996, it launched *TMC*, which was geared to the acquisition and development of broadcasting rights for audiovisual programs. Four years later, along with *Miramax*, a *Disney* subsidiary, it formed a group of economic interests that allowed it to break into the business of distribution of cinematographic products. In 2003, it made an agreement with Warner, thus reinforcing its position in this latter sector. The *Bertelsmann* group, primarily with German capital, leads the European communications market. Through the increase in subsidiaries, it ensures important positions in the areas of printing (*Gruner & Jahr*), book publishing (*Random House*), graphic industry (*Arvato*), and discography (Gabszewicz and Sonnac, 2006: 57-61).

2. Network organization

The practice of a vertical economy, capable of ensuring the group's omnipresence in the media arena, implies a network organization carried out through capital holdings in other media companies, the development of joint enterprises, the strengthening of commercial relations, and connecting people. This explains why competition, in its traditional sense, is further and further away from what, in effect, we notice in this domain. Besides, there is the increasing cost of visibility inherent to the development of a new magazine or newspaper, of a new radio station, or of a new TV station, which is an insurmountable expense for an independent initiative. When the *Bertelsmann* group launched the *Télé Deux Semaines* magazine in France, one third of the advertising associated with its launching was done on the *M6* Channel, which the group owns. The other two thirds of advertising were done on *TF-1*, property of the *Bouygues* group, with which the *Bertelsmann* group has partnerships.

Therefore, a sort of a functional agreement prevails among big players.

The groups *Bouygues*, *Berlusconi* and *Murdoch* formed a partnership to create a TV channel, *Breizh* TV, which broadcasts in the region of Brittany. *Dassault* and *Lagardère* associated as part of a company that publishes free newspapers (*Marseille Plus*, *Lyon Plus*, *Lille Plus*). *Lagardère* and *Socpresse* (a branch of *Dassault*) jointly publish *Version Femina*, a magazine with a circulation of over three million copies. These same companies created a group of economic interests with the goal of jointly acquiring all the paper needed for their publications, thus lowering their costs. They also formed a partnership to start a company geared to raise and place out advertising at a local level. *Bouygues* and *Bertelsmann* are the owners of the large majority of the social



capital of *TPS*, a digital TV company with over 200 channels and one million and six hundred thousand subscribers.

A political analysis programme, very popular in France and called «Le Grand Jury», is mediated by three journalists: one from the daily newspaper *Le Figaro*, which is owned by the *Dassault* group; one from *LCI*, a TV channel that belongs to the *Bouygues* group; and a third one from *RTL*, a chain of radio stations that are property of the *Bertelsmann* group. That program is broadcast live on *RTL* and *LCI*, and the main points are published the following day in *Le Figaro*.

About connecting people. Bernard Arnault, "the richest man in France", as society magazines proclaim, is the CEO of the *LVMH* group, which combines the initials of the three large companies that formed a partnership to create a giant group in the luxury item sector: *Louis Vitton*, *Moët and Hennessy*. Their showcase includes famous brands of beverages, clothing, and beauty products, such as *Moët & Chandon*, *Veuve Cliquot*, *Dom Pérignon*, *Louis Vuitton*, *Givenchy*, *Kenzo*, *Christian Dior*, and *Guerlain*. However, the *LVMH* group also owns the daily economics newspaper *Les Echos* and a vast array of periodicals, ranging from economy to culture: *La Tribune*, *Investir*, *Défis*, *Connaissance des Arts* and *Le Monde de la Musique*. Actually, Bernard Arnault is a member of the Financial Council of the *Lagardère* group, while Arnaud Lagardère is a member of the Management Board of *LVMH*.

3. Transnationalization

At the global level, we witness a true division of influence zones, where each of the main multimedia groups enjoys a predominant position.

Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, the leader in daily newspapers in English language, distributes its products in the United Kingdom and the United States of America, as well as in the Asian and Australian continents. The *Vivendi* group, sole proprietor of *Canal Plus*, a French paid channel with over twelve million subscribers, holds 53% of the social capital of the main Moroccan telecommunications company, *Maroc Telecom*. Through this company, it controls the capital of similar companies in Burkina Faso, Gabon, Mauritania, and Mali.

From the association of the North American trust *AOL* and the Brazilian bank *Itaú* with the Venezuelan group *Cisneros*, one of the most important in all of Latin America, founded in 1999, emerged *AOL Latin America*, from which *AOL Brazil*, *AOL Mexico*, *AOL Argentina*, and *AOL Puerto Rico* are part. This initiative, however, did not match the anticipated goals and, a few years later, *Cisneros* and its associates put an end to that venture and sold their assets for a nominal value. In 2008, *AOL Latin America* carried out a new implementation attempt in South America, this time in Argentina, Chile, Colombia, and Venezuela, offering a series of services associated with the Internet. However, *Cisneros'* efforts in the information and communications sectors did not stop here. In association with *General Motors*, it created *DIRECTV Latin America*, which includes 150 TV chains located in 28 countries, with a range of services that span from radio, to electronic sales, and data transmission (Rebelo, 2009: 181).

RTL, property of the *Bertelsmann* group, has holdings, almost always a majority, in the social capital of 23 generalist and thematic TV channels in Germany, Belgium, Luxemburg, and Hungary. It also holds capital interests in 24 radio stations in nine



different European countries. The *Lagardère* group, through its subsidiary *Hachette Filipacchi Médias*, is the first worldwide editor of news magazines, with 263 magazines in 39 different countries. As it happens, more than half of the 113,000 of the employees of the *Bouygues* communications group work outside of France.

4. Trans-sectorization

A fluid and diffuse mesh of overlapping interests, where multimedia companies intertwine and merge, openly or implicitly, with companies with a different business, led philosopher Michel Serres to state, in a text published in 1988: " I recognize the existence of a power unlike any ever seen in any other society [...]. But as that power is not of a typically material nature, I cannot imagine what force may rise against it " (in Lefebvre, 1989).

And there are many other examples. The *Lagardère* group holds 33% of the capital of *Aérospatiale-Matra*, the fifth largest world power in the aeronautical and military industry. The *Bouygues* group invests in the construction and public works industries, as well as in the reception and distribution networks of drinking water. The Management Board of *Rupert Murdoch News Corporation* includes representatives from *Boeing*, *Nike*, *Apple*, and *British Airways*.

The *Cisneros* group is an interested partner in companies such as *Procafé* (coffee roasting industry), *Pizza Hut* (restaurant business), *Spalding* (sports equipment), and *Pananco* (alcoholic beverages), and is one of the founders of *Gengold*, the second largest gold mining company in the world. One of Russia's main TV channels, *NTV*, belongs to *Gazprom*, a company that owns farms, food processing factories, health centres, luxury hotels, private clubs, and banks. Particularly active in the mining and medicinal water industries, *Gazprom* controls about one fifth of the world reserves of natural gas and produces one fourth of the world supply. Silvio Berlusconi's *Fininvest*, has connections to companies with Italian, British, and Saudi Arabian capital. The professional careers of some of the major stockholders of the Bertelsmann group, such as Albert Frère, include positions of great prominence in the banking and oil sectors (Rebelo, 2009: 180). A visit to *Vivendi's* web page will show that the group's social capital include, alongside French financial institutions like *Crédit Agricole*, *Banque Nationale de Paris/Paribas*, and *Société Générale*, underwriters from other countries and regions: *Emirates International Investment Company*, *Abu Dhabi Investment Authority*, *Bank of America*, *Crédit Suisse*, *Caisse de Dépôts et de Gestion* of Morocco.

In *Manufacturing Consent. The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman analyze the make-up of management boards of the ten major communication groups in the United States: *Dow Jones*, *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Time*, *CBS*, *Times-Mirror*, *Capital Cities*, *General Electric*, *Gannett*, and *Knight-Ridder*. They concluded that: 41.1% of the administrators were executive directors of multinationals; 8.4% were bankers; 13.7% were retired capitalists and former industrialists. 8.4% were lawyers; 4.2% were private consultants. The end of the millennium has confirmed, and arguably emphasized, this preponderance.



5. Capital Dispersion

Large media groups are usually identified by the name of their founders or main stockholders. That is why we refer to the *Dassault* group, *Lagardère* group, *Bouygues* group, *Murdoch* group, *Bertelsmann* group, *Berlusconi* group, etc. Such designations, however, must not obscure a main aspect: that a good portion of the capital of those groups is dispersed, which means we do not know exactly who it belongs to. First of all, it is dispersed through the development of the trans-sectorization strategies referred to above. In second place, it is dispersed as a result of the growing importance that investment funds, like *Cinven*, *Carlyle*, and *Apax*-partners, have acquired in the capital pool of the groups mentioned. According to a study published on 1 March 2005 in the French paper *Les Echos*, investment funds control 22% of *Bouygues*' capital, 37% of *Lagardère*'s capital, and 45% of *Vivendi Universal*'s capital.

The goal of those funds consists in quickly reselling acquired capital with substantial profits in each transaction. Therefore, capital moves incessantly and almost imperceptibly. It is also because, and here is the third reason that explains the dispersion of the capital of global dimension multimedia groups, they are listed in the stock market. It is expected that a company listed in the stock market will show gains and profitability that are at least compatible with those of companies in other business areas. If that does not happen, the investment funds and other capital holders will instantly dump their stock causing an immediate drop in value and, as a consequence, capital losses for those companies. All of these factors combine to account for the fact that the media are seen as a mere commodity, subject to the ups and downs that result from commercial interests, beyond other much more obscure.

CONTENT STANDARDIZATION/ NATURALISATION OF REALITY

Our everyday routine is made up of an endless zigzag between problems. Unemployment. Health. Housing. Problems which are and are not our problems. They are *our problems* to the extent that they affect us directly and we are their victims. *They are not our problems* in the sense that their genesis is external to us. They are problems that underwent a naturalization process. It is precisely that naturalization process that makes us lose the sense of external that renders us unable to be fully conscious of the building of an itinerary that, if it is not imposed upon us, it is intimated. It is that process that helps to establish a relationship of complicity between the dominant and the dominated. Through this relationship, the dominated, who disregards his condition as dominated, or perhaps is not even aware of it, recognizes, and in recognizing legitimises, the statute of the dominant. Or, to quote Bourdieu, it makes it so that the dominated "forgets and ignores himself, submitting [to the dominant] in the same way he contributed, through his recognition, to making him legitimate" (1982: 119). It is a naturalization process that leads to loyalty and to agreements. These are not the "common agreements" of Kantian inspiration, but agreements that hide strategies that Grasmci called "hegemonic".

The major media groups have, from the beginning, worked as driving forces of those naturalization processes. They placed themselves, from early on, in a "social space", in the meaning Pierre Bourdieu conferred to that concept (1979), which is the place where what distinguishes us is, the place where contradictions and social struggles are played out. Diving into that "social space" where they find people and objects they propose to



"*mediatize*", the media act as carriers/accelerators of hierarchies or norms which are the vary same hierarchies or norms of this or another social group, and corresponding interests. To achieve that, they use three techniques: the technique of institutionalisation; the technique of explanation; and the technique of repetition.

In terms of institutionalisation, they resort to operations of classification, standardization, and typification of experiences, which, as a result, lose their originality and individuality to become diluted inside paradigms that are external to them.

The technique of explanation entails a dimension of rationality and a dimension of rationalization. As a rational effort of interpretation, Esquezani stresses (2002: 78) that explanation advances arguments liable to be exposed and, therefore, refutable. As a rationalizing attempt, it is connected to a specific lifestyle and represents a normative perspective, an imposition attempt by a specific social order.

The technique of repetition is used because, as events are insatiably repeated in the media, "in a sort of enchanting ritual, exorcist practice, journalistic litany, rhetoric refrain" (Derrida, 2004: 134), they become imposed on us. They become part of ordinary discourse. They become part of our arsenal of *preconceptions* (Gadamer, 1995: 110). "Through repetition", Moscovici points out, "the idea is dissociated from its author: it is transformed into evidence, independently of time, place, or person; it ceases to be the expression of the one who speaks to become the expression of the thing of which we speak" (1981: 198-199). For that reason, evoking September 11, is instantly associated with the terrorist act against the twin towers in New York. But it was also on 11 September that Salvador Allende falls victim to the bullets of assassins. The New York September 11 was the object of a datation process, whereas the September 11 in Santiago, Chile, was not.

Strategically organized according to a vertical management model; organized into networks through alliances, collaboration protocols, and social exchanges; delineating areas of action at a global level; integrating themselves into increasingly larger and complex groups of companies or groups with more diversified commercial, economic, and financial goals; keeping the sources of their capital anonymous: In this manner, the multimedia groups contribute to the acceleration of naturalization processes, to the development of stereotypes, and to the decision of what themes will navigate the public space.

They contribute through what they say or write. They contribute through what they do not say or do not write. "The media instinctively keeps certain types of facts out of the public space and selects others to which they confer increased visibility", observes Jean-Pierre Ezquenazi. "A coherent critique of the media", he adds, "can not be satisfied with analyzing the media discourse actually delivered. It must also take into account the media "non-discourse". To determine which facts are not, or are never, object of the media is one way to learn about the selections that are made" (2002:70). And this is done directly and indirectly.

They do it directly through the decisive force of their own products: the so-called "global products", such as the TV game "The Wheel of Fortune", which became part of television programming worldwide. Or they do it by benefiting of quasi monopoly regimes in vast regions of the world. In 2004, magazines of the *Lagardère* group, such as *Elle* and *Paris Match* sold over one thousand million copies. Vivendi Universal and the *Bertelsmann* group, the latter in association with *Sony BMG*, are responsible for the



production of half of the records in the world. This is the same Vivendi that, according to *IDATE* (a research and consulting firm based in Montpellier), is the proprietor of a catalog with over 10,000 movies and more than 40,000 hours of television programmes. And what can we say about the importance on the circulation of information of newspapers such as *The Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Le Figaro*, and *Libération*, all of which belong to major groups?

Even *Le Monde* which, since its founding in 1945, was the only example of press controlled by its own workers - journalists, employees, and managers - ended up in the hands of three important French business men who, in 2010, offered to pay its debt in excess of 150 million euros. They are: Pierre Bergé, an industrialist in luxury items sector and close to couturier *Yves Saint Laurent*; *Mattieu Pigasse*, Vice CEO of the bank *Lazard*; and *Xavier Niel*, CEO of the French telecommunications group *Iliad*. By taking control of such a prestigious newspaper as *Le Monde*, they crowned their project of entrance into the field of information and communication. In fact, at the time they invested in *Le Monde*, Pierre Bergé was already the proprietor of the magazine *Têtu*, and *Mattieu Pigasse* owned *Les Inrockuptibles*, a magazine that stands out on account of the irreverence with which it approaches issues linked to the world of music, film, literature, and television. *Xavier Niel*, on the other hand, had created *Foundation Free*, officially geared to set up all French homes with a free telephone line, free access to the Internet, and an antenna service that would grant access to all non-paid channels of digital terrestrial television.

Indirectly, they do it through the social imaginary model they build and which will be repeated on the editorial options of other media. It is the "mimetic effect", developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1997). It is *Baudrillard's* theory of "the smallest marginal difference" (1983), which bases the identity of a newspaper in a double premise: to offer something the others do not, as well as everything the others do.

It is, in short, the effect of standardization of themes and approaches that overflows from the large groups to contaminate the whole field of media.

The reactions provoked by the attempt to build a mosque in Lodi, a village located some thirty kilometers from Milan, clearly illustrate that. The initiative by a group of Arab immigrants provoked an immediate reaction by representatives of the Catholic Church and right wing groups. A cardinal, the archbishop of Bologna, appealed to the redefinition of Italian immigration policy to favor Catholic immigrants over Muslims, the latter considered incompatible with a country historically devoted to Christ. He insisted upon the application of the principle of "reciprocity" - "we must receive Muslims the same way they receive us Christians" - and alerted against the Muslim "invasion" that posed a threat to the "Italian identity". The Northern League, openly xenophobic, based its public interventions on the natural/artificial dichotomy. "Natural" behaviour would be "healthy": the traditional family, the religion of the majority, and the good traditions "which characterize us". The behaviour of those the Northern League readily classified as "communists" and "terrorists" would be "artificial". One of Berlusconi's ministers took a strong stand, always related to the building of the mosque, against the "enemies" who previously posed an external threat and now grouped themselves inside Italy's borders. Negligently, the governor of the Bank of Italy made a reference to those who are nothing more than "a work force", therefore incapable of being a source of diversity and cultural renewal.



This is the frame of reference that served as a starting point for all media coverage. They were diverse to the extent that they were propagated through different channels of information, but quite similar in their presuppositions and arguments.

According to an investigation carried out by the national television network, *RAI*, their own television coverage had supported the locals and muffled the reasons invoked by the Arab immigrants. Likewise, an analysis of the news content and commentaries published at the time by two newspapers of different political tendencies, the right wing *Corriere de la Sera* and the moderate left *Repubblica*, revealed that, in the sequence of demonstrations against the building of the mosque, in the early days of October 2000, the *Corriere* wrote in major headlines: "Mass against the Mosque", "Tension in Lodi". Its articles insisted upon the paradigm of the "Italian family" and the "danger of Islam". The *Repubblica*, in turn, and despite publishing the views of leaders like Romano Prodi, who defended the laity of the state and peaceful coexistence, also defended positions in line with those defended by the archbishop of Bologna.

Drawing conclusions from the media handling of this event and its public repercussions, Fábio Perocco, who used this theme as a launching point for a chapter he wrote for a book on the role of religion in the development of European identities, stressed the confusion established between Islam as a religion and the Muslim world in its whole. Such confusion is food for simplistic interpretations, and validates stereotypes built upon constantly evoked episodes (the Rushdie case, the wearing of the *tchador* and the condition of women, rituals involving animal sacrifices, etc.). In his opinion, Islam, presented as a threat, functioned like a mirror where all the unresolved questions of Italian history and politics, namely the issue of national unity are reflected (Perocco, 208:153). Joseph Maila advanced a similar idea in the eve of the debate over the European Constitution, stating in an article in the magazine *Esprit*: "the Non-Europe exposed Europe"

THE CHALLENGE OF NEW TECHNOLOGIES

It is true that the Internet and the cell phone revolutionized the world of information and communications. It is true that each one of us may, through the new media, send and receive information. It is true that the screens of computers and cell phones are filled with petitions, summons, and messages. In *La Culture-monde, réponse à une société désorientée*, Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy assert that: Starting from a new global language - digital language - a new technology develops, whose unbelievable and inevitable progression the 21st century discovers, year after year, month after month. Nowadays, screens are everywhere: from pocket screens to giant screens, from *GPS* to the *Blackberry*, from the console of home games to the atmospheric screen, from the security screen to the medical screen, from the digital picture frame to the cell phone, which becomes a multipurpose screen that not only allows internet access or viewing movies, but also displays *GPS* or a digital agenda book. A world of screens transformed into Web- world [...] nothing can be done, from the most complex to the simplest of tasks, without the use of a computer. *Homo sapiens* has become *Homo ecranis*" (2008: 82, 83)

However, it is also true that the big groups include telecommunication companies and services of Internet access in their business. It is also true that, ever more, they fill the screens of cell phones with their own programmes - sports, fiction, etc. - and that the



online editions of their newspapers and magazines are all over the Internet. And it is also true that, by political decision, the flux of messages may be stopped. Let us consider what happened in China and, more recently, during the popular demonstrations that rocked the capital of Mozambique.

We are faced with a double challenge. On the one hand, it is a political problem and, at this level, it is a struggle in which the parties involved do not have access to the same weapons, at least not for the moment. On the other hand, it is a problem associated with the excess, selection, and verification of information. Going back to Lipovetsky and Serroy: "in the West, freedom is not threatened by deficit, censorship or restrictions, but rather by the over information, the overdose, the chaos. We do not lack information: we have plenty of it; what we lack is a method so that each one of us may navigate safely through that undifferentiated overabundance, and may reach an analytical and critical distance, a fundamental condition for the development of awareness" (2008: 87).

The issue of digital terrestrial television persists. This is a technology that must be generalized in Portugal by the year 2012. Will it allow the influx of new operators and the production of innovative content? France's example does not constitute a good prognostic. As Janine Brémond points out (2005: 48, 49), over two thirds of digital terrestrial channels were distributed to dominant groups: five to the Vivendi group (canal Plus); six to the *Bouygues* group (*TF1*); five to the *Bertelsmann* group (*M6*); three to the *Lagardère* group.

Of the six channels distributed to newcomers to the market, three went to the AB group (an acronym created from the initials of the surnames of its founders, Jean-Luc Azoulay and Claude Berda). Self proclaimed "independent", the AB group is closely connected to *TF1* and the securing of publicity channelled through its products is in the hands of the *Lagardère* group. With few salaried employees, including journalists, AB is already known as the expression of televised fast food. It follows a low-cost approach based on the broadcast of canned programs.

And nothing keeps this model from multiplying.

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