
DISSECTING THE NEWS & LIGHTING THE FUSE

DISPATCHES
FROM THE
MEDIA WAR

**DANNY
SCHECHTER**

The News Dissector



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Mediachannel.org

DEDICATION

To all who believe in the value of a free press and recognize the need to renew its mission in order to stop the slide towards the dumbing down of democracy.

For all our media heroes worldwide who continue the fight.

Forward Ever, Backward Never.

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“I woke up one morning several years ago and found myself seventy years old. It is a matter of scant moment; my rounds will go pleurably on as they always have, world without end, until my masters trade me in at the antiques show for some dubious bit of art deco. Still, the recollections press an unexpectedly insistent claim.”

– *Newspaper Columnist Murray Kempton, 1994*

BOOKS BY DANNY SCHECHTER

Blogothon

Cosimo Books, 2012

Occupy: Dissecting Occupy Wall Street

Cosimo Books, 2012

ColdType.Net (eBook)

Foreword to *The Report of the Financial Crisis Inquiry*

Commission of The United States

Cosimo Books, 2011

The Crime of Our Time: Why Wall Street is Not Too Big to Jail

The Disinformation Company, 2010

Introduction to *The History of The Standard Oil Company,*

by Ida M. Tarbell

Cosimo Books, 2009

Plunder: Investigating Our Economic Calamity

Cosimo Books, 2008

When News Lies: Media Complicity and the Iraq War

Select Books, 2006

The Death of Media and the Fight to Save Democracy

Melville House Publishing, 2005

Embedded: Weapons of Mass Deception (How the Media Failed to Cover the War on Iraq)

Prometheus Books, 2003

ColdType.Net (eBook)

Media Wars: News at a Time of Terror

Rowman & Littlefield Publishers (U.S.A), 2003

Innovation Books (Bonn, Germany), 2002

News Dissector: Passions Pieces and Polemics

Akashic Books, 2001

ElectronPress.com, 2000

Hail to the Thief: How the Media “Stole” the 2000 Presidential Election

[Edited with Roland Schatz]

Innovation Books, 2000

ElectronPress.com (U.S.A)

Falun Gong’s Challenge to China

Akashic Books, 1999, 2000

The More You Watch the Less You Know

Seven Stories Press, 1997, 1999

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INTRODUCTION: MY MEDIA MANDATE

1. MEMORY MATTERS

As he aged, Nelson Mandela turned his principal foundation into a Center of Memory, not only to share the achievements of his phenomenal life but also to keep the story of the South African freedom struggle alive for new generations. Many, in just 20 years, had forgotten, or never learned about its sacrifices.

Memory is not just the preserve of the iconic and important, but something that all of us lose with the passage of time, especially because we live in societies oriented towards living in the present, in the here and the now, with little sense of a collective past beyond what most of us learn in school and then promptly forget.

In Uganda, women facing an early death from AIDS, or diseases of poverty, came up with the idea of creating “memory boxes” to collect photos, heirlooms, and family histories to share with the children who will survive them. The boxes quickly became a popular way to pass on their history, values, and reminiscences to the next generation.

In more “developed” societies, we have vast professional archives to collect and preserve documents and artifacts, even though many are dependent on funding or university support. The state of Georgia just announced that is cutting the staff that maintains its archive, while in many states and cities, funding for public libraries is disappearing. Few of these places still have bookstores, with publishers increasingly relying on on-line sales. In some towns, newspapers face extinction and Local TV news may be next.

Already, the media outlets that most of us rely on minimize context and background in reporting, often recycling stenographic accounts missing in interpretation. Even as we have more technology than ever to connect us with a changing world, it tends to be used more for entertainment than information. The most popular websites are the best-marketed ones. The superficial still trumps the substantive.

A recent study of Monterey, California, showed how what we remember is often influenced by the powers that be. John Herbst wrote, “many people will find the elements of the Monterey experience familiar: a history represented by upper class homes; socially elite governing boards and societies;

outdated and non-inclusive interpretive exhibits; the tour guide who is a local history ‘gatekeeper;’ emphasis on decorative arts and furnishings on a historic house tour; the lack of emphasis on industrial history; the commercial exploitation of adaptively used industrial buildings.”

This is the conflict the late Howard Zinn addressed years ago in his writing on the tension between official history and “people’s history.” It surfaces time and time again, when we think about whom we remember, and what to remember.

There is a personal component in this conflict for me as a long time social activist, journalist, filmmaker, and sometime troublemaker. As a storyteller and journalist, I have often used my own experiences as a prism to explore the past. As my mom, the poet Ruth Lisa Schechter quipped, “He knows what it is because he was there when it was.”

History is still being made and remade and I am hardly the only one with tales to tell.

As a relatively experienced observer who has lived through decades of tumultuous change and traveled to some 70 countries, I have developed my own reporting style and framework for analysis that informs my writing and media work. It is grounded in a personal family history as well. As the child of working class parents with an immigrant background, I grew up in a culture that worshipped great writers and a history of labor struggles.

I was introduced early on to a rich history replete with leaders who battled for social justice. That shaped my own orientation. Later, my immersion in the social movements of my time—student activism, civil rights, the anti-war, and anti-apartheid battles brought me into contact with well-known activists and important leaders.

In this book, you will find an essay on a “secret” I have kept since the 60’s, my small role in the underground inside South Africa that assisted the armed struggle, that decades later, helped liberate that country. I helped organize unions and rent strikes. I marched in many protests in New York and Washington. I taught in freedom schools and reported on demonstrations. I wrote for and then edited a high school newspaper and college magazine.

In my twenties, I began traveling the world witnessing South African

apartheid in its darkest days and then the protests that rocked London, Berlin, and Paris in the late 60's. I came back to America to pursue a career in journalism ending up as a News Dissector and the "News Dissector" at rock and roll radio, local TV news, talk programs, CNN, ABC News and later my own production company, Globalvision, where my colleagues and I made TV series and many documentaries. In my case, six were with Nelson Mandela.

I realized that there was a media war underway over what to report and how to do it. I realized that media omission was as bad as commission in the slanting of news. What we don't know is often more important than what we think we do. Hence, my calling this collection, "Dispatches" from an ongoing conflict.

In my own work, I had gone from being an outsider to an insider, and then an outsider again, always independent in spirit and critical in outlook. I went from the underground press to the mainstream media, from print to radio and TV, and back to print. Today I am often on the air around the world, commenting for BBC, Al Jazeera, Press TV, Russia Today, Saudi Arabia TV, and even Austrian radio, but rarely, if ever, for the networks I used to work for. I do appear weekly on Reverend Jesse Jackson's *Keep Hope Alive Radio* show, and contribute to websites worldwide.

As the digital age dawned, I went online in 1986 and never came back. I was part of teams that launched various websites, and have written a daily blog for almost 12 years. (You can follow it at newsdissector.net).

I wrote my first book on what it was like to work in the trenches of mainstream media in 1997. It was called *The More You Watch the Less You Know*. Afterwards, I seem to have written a new one every year for a small following, often – alas – poorly promoted by small independent publishers. They tried, but the big houses get more attention for their books because they have advertising budgets that smaller imprints lack. I have written about media, war, politics and activism. My last two books are, *Blogothon*, a collection of some of my online work, and *Occupy: Dissecting Occupy Wall Street*, a report on the contemporary fight for economic justice.

This book on your screen is #15, probably the last one because it became clear that while I had the energy to write and churn them out, I didn't have the wherewithal or connections to get them distributed as widely as I would

have liked. I would like to think that it is not due to their quality.

It may be that all these multimedia interests, flitting from blogging, to movie making, all my globetrotting, and a blend of activism and journalism ensured that I had no one “field” to be associated with or remembered for. It seems axiomatic that to develop a public profile, you have to do “one thing well.” That advice never fit well with my more hyperactive personality. We live in the age of the brand, and among the many who compete for attention in the highly commercialized “media space,” the notion of a “News Dissector” may be regarded more as a catchy phrase, but not for a serious body of work, despite an Emmy and other media awards.

A media careerist might see me as my own worst enemy for trying to do too many projects and too quickly. It is a criticism I hear frequently and there is some truth to it. We are told that people who act as their own lawyers “have a fool for a client,” so the writer and filmmaker who tries to do his own PR invites charges of being self-promotional, and then, can be ignored. However, I don’t feel ignored. I have been blessed by being associated with teams of colleagues who work with me, put up with me, and encourage my pursuits. I am proud of what I have accomplished and I am hardly the only dissenter and critic whose work is ignored by the guardians of the status quo.

What a long and sometimes strange trip it has been and continues to be. I am always dancing on the edge of the contradictions, somehow managing to find the funding and audiences to keep going. I can still drop names with the best of them, but none of it matters when you are working in what people on the inside consider the “wilderness,” a place reserved for marginalized voices and gadflies. How I hate that putdown!

I have dipped my fingers in many oceans, traveled up the Yangtze and down the Ho Chi Minh trail. I organized rent strikes in Harlem and taught at a civil rights Freedom School in Mississippi. I have been underground in the secret war against apartheid and over ground up on the mountaintop with the economic elite in Davos, Switzerland. I traveled with the Dalai Lama, marched with Martin Luther King, rallied with SDS, dined with Malcolm X, met Jean-Paul Sartre, connected with Fela, Amilcar Cabral, Oliver Tambo, and Samora Machel in Africa. Visited the home of Patrice Lumumba in Kinshasa, and more recently, ran with Occupy Wall Street on, where else, Wall Street. I also met Yasser Arafat, Le Duc Tho, and later, yuck, Henry

Kissinger and Spiro T. Agnew.

I yipped with Abbie Hoffman, helped produce the all-star Sun City anti-apartheid album with Little Steven, Bruce Springsteen, Bono and Miles Davis et al. Profiled Tina Turner and Bob Dylan, did one of the first national TV reports on hip-hop, visited John and Yoko at home, shook hands with Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, Teddy Kennedy and Tip O'Neil, and had lunch with George Soros. I have been more fulfilled by what I have been able to produce, than by connecting briefly with the "good and the great."

I have been to many political conferences, media conferences and TV award ceremonies. I have been to China and many Chinatowns. Sometimes I felt like Woody Allen's Zelig.

I would like to think my investigations were ahead of their time, including a film warning of the financial crisis in 2006 and another explaining why it was a crime story, not just an economic miscalculation. I did a film exposing election fraud in 2000, another calling for tolerance in the aftermath of 9/11, and yet another, explaining how Barack Obama won in 2008.

I wrote the first book published on the Iraq War along with a film exposing the role of our own TV industry as propagandists called *WMD: Weapons of Mass Deception*. At points, I have been widely published, and at other points ignored, or spied upon by the CIA and FBI. I know because I have seen my files. In one of my most wannabe revolutionary moments, one of their informants praised me as likeable if "funky" for wearing my hair in the "bouffant style of a woman." So, even as I saw myself as a feared militant, they saw me as a teddy bear. Some activists even considered me an agent because I knew too much about the covert world, or because of the paranoia and suspicion that festers in the left political culture.

Smile.

I know of only a few friends, comrades, and colleagues who have been as immersed, and learned so much, in the course of so many adventures, doing so many things, going so many places, over so many decades, from the 1940's through 2012 and still counting.

This book and my earlier work is one way of giving back, sharing what I care about and hoping you will care too.

Like so many of those comrades, I learned humility in the course of overreaching or moving too fast. I am not proud of making the mistakes I've made, or, at points, exercising bad judgment, depending on the wrong people, which often led to avoidable unhappiness. Not everything I attempted was successful, and I have lost friends by disappointing them, and even attracted some enemies, who for their own reasons and delusions consider me the devil incarnate. I regret not always being there enough for my daughter, and putting too much time and energy into work and not enough into family. I haven't always lived a balanced life, maybe because I don't know how.

In the end, you, the reader, will have to determine if this work is informative, insightful, or worth reading and passing on. As that cynically misused slogan says, "I report, you decide."

Tell me what you think, write me at dissector@mediachannel.org

If you find my writing of value, follow me on Twitter on [@DissectorEvents](https://twitter.com/DissectorEvents), on Facebook, or at my blog at newsdissector.net

Thanks again to Tony Sutton of ColdType.net for packaging this work for friends, fans, and followers. Special thanks to Ian Escuela for proofing this volume and helping relaunch Mediachannel.org This book is intended, in part, to win support for our work on the web.

Danny Schechter
October 2012

2. THE MORE YOU WATCH THE LESS YOU KNOW: TEN YEARS ON

Ten years ago, during a hot summer like this one, I was writing my first book, *The More You Watch the Less You Know* (Seven Stories Press). I considered it a “media-ography,” distilling my experiences and analysis of media trends on a wide canvas with a focus on my own concerns about journalism and thoughts on the business based on my experiences as media maker and critic.

Over this past decade, I have seen no reason to revise the title, which I found that just about everyone I told about the book appreciated. The reaction of listeners to right wing and left wing radio was more similar than I imagined. They agreed with the broad strokes of the critique, though often for different reasons. I had the feeling that the book might have done better had I just left all the pages blank and let people fill in their own reasons for their own anger with our media.

While I was writing, media bashing was just becoming more and more popular. I wrote about all the phenomena that have since come to define the era—media concentration, the rise and decline of CNN and network news, and the birth of Fox News (I was at their opening party!).

I was then, and still am, in a somewhat unique position---as a former network producer turned independent media maven who could, to borrow a line from my late poet-mom, “tell it like it is because I was there when it was.” I brought an insider’s experience media criticism, a role usually played by academics and outsiders.

If my book was at all distinctive at the time, it was because I told stories out of school —many of them quite humorous--- stories about what it was like for someone who came out of the student and civil rights movements to join and spend years toiling in “Big Media”—in radio, local TV, cable news, TV network magazine journalism, and as an independent filmmaker.

I have been making media and media critiques for a long time. Vanity Fair’s Michael Wolff even joked about it in his introduction to *When News Lies*, my 2006 book on the media coverage of the Iraq War. He noted, “Danny doing his job as long as he has been doing it, has become something like the

2000-year-old-media critics—he’s one of the few guys who can be counted on to consistently know the real score.”

If you ignore the hyperbole and hype, and if there is a kernel of truth in that (I would like to think so), then perhaps there is some value in talking about how and why I did what I did. It’s one thing to judge the product of independent media with so many readers and viewer these days only seeking out arguments they agree with, then there is also value in understanding the process and the challenges of creating media that goes against the grain.

Early in 2006, I was in Doha at an Al Jazeera media forum. An Arab professor was digesting a study that I assumed would add more ammunition to those who find western media wanting, but instead, he expressed a profound sadness that western media consumers were often so uninformed. He took pride, he said, to note that Arab media does a better job of offering more diverse sources of information. He was very sincere—and probably right.

That is why we need to understand media as a system—not just a story. I would like to think that my experience in many media incarnations could help contribute to that discovery and the need to do something about it.

I would like to think my insights were unique but of course, but I always knew I was never alone in the way I felt. My ego seems big at times—but not that big! A massive library can now be built just to store all the books; tomes, articles, reports and documents criticizing the role our media plays that came out before and after my own.

Other “network defectors” or “refugees,” as I called myself, have now turned a minority stance into a widely shared mainstream conviction. Surveys show as much as 70 percent of the public is dissatisfied with our media system. They want something different and so do I. And, something very different is emerging....

But what, and who is going to produce it, and how? And, if it is produced, who’s going to air it? That question haunts me now as much now as it did then. Our frustration with the failures of mainstream media may now be widely shared, but our independent media, as a political movement or production engine is not yet the kind of powerful force it should be, and so our independent media presence is still marginalized, under resourced and not competitive with the MSM (mainstream media we deride). Even

as production costs come down thanks to new technologies, distribution capacity is still limited even in the age of the Internet and broadband digital networks. That may be changing although major corporations still control access to many of the “pipes” of dissemination.

More You Watch the Less You Know chronicled my media adventures, hopes and disappointments, and the story of building Globalvision as an independent progressive Media company that had to survive in an unfriendly market place. We were undercapitalized and under resourced from the get go. We set out to make films and videos, doing work that married money and meaning. We cared more about Mandela the leader than Monica the White House intern.

We were also internationalists, while many in the progressive community looked inward and became immersed in domestic politics. While some were focusing on Texas, we were also interested in Tajikistan.

We set ourselves up as a company called Globalvision, not a cause. We had good years and bad. The book also details our early work on human rights and South Africa. This essay brings part of the story, mostly my part, up to date at least through the summer of 2006, a year before the financial crisis crashed more than one bubble.

Let me pick up where the book left off ten years ago—following up on the call it made for a Media Channel to watch all the other channels, a network through which media savvy groups could come together and showcase their concerns. When that fantasy “balloon” went up, it was conceived as a potential TV channel on the cable dial, an outlet for films, programs, and criticism, themed around the role our media plays. The idea was to provide a platform for an ongoing critique and counter-narrative to the news as it was being reported.

Wouldn't it be cool, I thought, to be able to deconstruct, comment upon, and analyze media in real time, not years later as so many academics do, after it had been forgotten or became part of an unread historical record? We wanted to intervene in the ongoing media debate, deepen it, and organize around it.

It was in that period that my partner Rory and I looked out of our Globalvision offices in Times Square and saw the transformation of our neighborhood

into a Mecca for media and a physical epicenter of media concentration with all the big networks and ancillary businesses clustered in a ten block area, or at least represented with signage, studios, and other symbols of the power of their “brand.”

As if to symbolize the interdependence of finance power and media power, the NASDAQ exchange and an investment bank positioned themselves at each corner of the square. In the middle, a Toys R’ Us shopping mall opened across the street from the new MTV store, with a bevy of other brand-name outlets that market their wares through broadcasting. The legendary “crossroads of the world,” the aptly named “Great White Way,” for all its ostentatious lighting, had a new mission as the epicenter of media empires.

Watching this transformation in front of own eyes led to another insight. Our aspiration to produce independent media about the problems of the world would be forever limited unless we could somehow tackle that beast.

We had to recognize that one of the big problems of the world, the Media, was right in front of us, and barely acknowledged as a problem. Its legendary “gate-keepers” were there to dumb-down the content, commercialize all messaging, and keep our kind of progressive content off the air. It wasn’t exactly a conspiracy, but similar templates, ways of working, and market logics operated to sanitize news and suppress more critical fare. Most of the time, programming was not rejected explicitly on political or content grounds, rather, it was always “good work, but it’s not for us.”

We were media people with some knowledge and insight into the way the industry works—and doesn’t work in terms of deepening our democracy. This was our issue if there ever was one.

We were just a handful of people, but we hadn’t shied away from tackling big problems. For three years, we produced weekly programs exposing apartheid in South Africa and the fight against it. Our *South Africa Now* series won awards and helped support the fight for democracy in that beloved country. Our follow-up series, *Rights & Wrongs: Human Rights Television*, with Charlayne Hunter-Gault, did the same for under covered human rights abuses worldwide.

Tackling the media, in the way we wanted to do it, was no small task. How

do you even get a handle on a problem, which is so well financed and so deeply accepted, in our culture? What's the "way-in" and how can you have any impact at all.

First, we had to abandon the idea of a TV channel. It was far too expensive even to contemplate. Most channel start-ups back in the 1990's were in the \$50-75 MILLION dollar range, and even if you somehow come up with high-quality alternative programming, who would air it? Not the media monopolies that control the cable systems. If there's one thing that media companies hate more than on target criticism, it's having those criticisms turn up on their own airwaves.

Next, we had to find a model for what we could do. If we couldn't get on the air, we could, we thought, do it on-line. As an internationally oriented company, Globalvision always had an eye on what was happening overseas.

It was then we found the fledging One World network in England, which first launched in 1995. Its organizer, Peter Armstrong, a former TV producer like ourselves, realized that content from NGO's could be aggregated and brought together on one website, a "supersite" or portal that could bring a world of concerned people and organizations together in the same virtual space to offer news and information about shared hopes and problems.

The Omidyar Network would later describe it this way:

"One World encourages people to discover their power — power to speak, connect, and make a difference — by providing access to information, and enabling connections between hundreds of organizations and tens of thousands of people around the world.

The people drive the One World network and organizations it supports — people write the news, provide the video clips, and the radio stories. Through this network, individuals have access to information previously unavailable to them — information that can broaden their world view and enable them to make better decisions."

I went to London, actually to Peter and his family's farmhouse in the rolling fields outside Oxford, to see for myself. I was impressed. A new world of media was functioning in the English countryside.

A Media Channel could be built along those lines. Peter was supportive and welcomed us to become a One World affiliate. A colleague went to Oxford in 1999 to build a prototype that we would later use for funding what became our not-for-profit network.

We now had a way to realize our big idea. One World's technology was a bit clunky, but it worked. Some funders saw the potential. One funder gave us computers and even sent over a crack team of Chinese technicians to wire it up and help us get online.

The core of the idea was to build partnerships with like-minded organizations worldwide so that readers would find a wide range of diverse views. As we struggled with the technical challenges—that would later support more than 1300 affiliates, not always smoothly, we hammered out a mission statement and plan of action:

MediaChannel.org is a nonprofit, public interest web-based network dedicated to raising awareness and promoting citizen action around global media issues. We seek to do more than encourage structural reforms and regulations; we seek more responsibility, accountability and transparency within media organizations and seek to defend media freedom while encouraging better journalism to serve the public interest.

Media channel aspired to become a robust internationally respected on-line media platform for an informed non-partisan and post-partisan discourse about the critical link between media and democracy featuring solution-oriented media analysis, education, research, criticism, debate and activism.

We report on the media but also inspire citizen engagement by participating in industry conferences, speaking out on radio and television, producing books and encouraging films, while campaigning to challenge and change media practices.

What We Will Do

Media Channel is concerned with the political, cultural and social impacts of our media system, large and small. Media Channel exists to provide comprehensive news, information and diverse perspectives to inspire collaboration, action and engagement through citizen journalism and reform. Making sense of the steady stream of infotainment requires background, context and interpretation. It demands outreach and inspiration.

Media Channel is unique in offering news, reports and analysis from our editors and an international network of contributors, media-issues organizations and publications, as well as original features from contributors and staff. Our highly visible and diverse team speaks widely at universities and events worldwide, organizes well-attended public events and appears on radio and TV.

Our slogan: “While the media watch the world. We watch the media.”

THE NEXT STEP

Once we had a prototype, we began to reach out to organizations and individuals we thought might join us. Since we saw media as a global force, we needed to involve colleagues overseas. We were not just interested in recruiting from the progressive community. As media makers, we wanted other media professionals to join us. If we were to be taken seriously, as more than advocates on the fringe, we wanted to engage with as many media people and institutions as possible. From our own experience, we knew that change has to take place on the inside often with pressure from the outside.

As I began to reach out for people who might be interested in helping us, I spoke with Lewis Lapham, the former editor of *Harpers*, a brilliant thinker and writer. Lewis told me about an Italian publisher who was very outspoken on the issue but also very busy and hard to reach during his infrequent visits to America.

His name was Leonardo Mondadori, the scion of the famous Italian publishing company that had been taken over by the Berlusconi media interests. Some in Leonardo's family had connived with Berlusconi while Leonardo resisted the takeover. In the end, the company was acquired but Leonardo remained in charge, at least nominally. This experience raised his consciousness about the dangers of media consolidation and he vowed to fight it.

I dropped the names of Lapham and an Italian supporter of ours, Marialina Marcucci, who programmed our *Rights & Wrongs* series on the Superchannel she once owned in Europe. He agreed to see me in his penthouse apartment on New York's East Side. He was friendly, charming, and interested, but also checked me out quickly by calling Marialina on her cell phone in Italy to see if she really knew me. He put her on the phone and after a few Cias and some personal back and forth, he was ready to hear my pitch.

He loved the prototype and got the idea and its value at once. He offered to help, and eventually did with advice, active support, and money. Here was another lesson in the power of positive contradictions. A wealthy Italian in the top ranks of that country's media elite wanted to change the media as much as we did, and he had the means to help us do it.

With Leonardo's help and a few foundation grants, we launched Media channel.org on February 1, 2000. The date had a special significance for me because it was the anniversary of the first student anti-segregation sit-in at the Woolworth's store in Greensboro, North Carolina. That dramatic action sparked the civil rights movement of the 60's and drew me into civil rights activism.

We were at the beginning of a new century and we had a new project. Our launch event drew prominent journalists and an endorsement from Walter Cronkite, who couldn't make it, but sent a video message. We were thrilled when the newscaster called the "most trusted man in America" agreed to bless our insurgent effort to reform an industry, which was, as he noted, urgently in need of change.

So there we were, activists and advocates, turning to a big screen to watch the man who had represented the best and often the limits of network news for so many years. He said:

“Good evening, I’m Walter Cronkite. I really wanted to be with you in person tonight for Globalvision New Media’s launch of the new Internet site the Media Channel, but unfortunately, I was called out of the country. Yet the issues that led to the creation of this unique global resource, and the crisis that’s facing all of us who work in and care about journalism and the media, are so profound that I simply felt compelled to tape this message so that you would know that I am with you in spirit at least.

As you know, I’ve been increasingly and publicly critical of the direction that journalism has taken of late, and of the impact on democratic discourse and principles. Like you, I’m deeply concerned about the merger mania that has swept our industry, diluting standards, dumbing down the news, and making the bottom line sometimes seem like the only line. It isn’t and it shouldn’t be. At the same time, I’m impressed that so many other serious and concerned people around the world are also becoming interested in holding media companies accountable and upholding the highest standards of journalism. The Media Channel will undoubtedly be worth watching and taking part in. I am intrigued by its potential, and its global reach....”

That was a heady endorsement, from the man considered by many to be a News God!

Mediachannel.org was up and running. Some funding was in place as we began our work amidst many internal debates about what we should do and how we should do it.

Ever the journalist, I wanted us to be timely, commenting on media coverage of news as it happened. I decided to write what was then a new medium—a weblog. Today, five years later, there are an estimated 50 MILLION blogs on the web. Mine wasn’t the first—but I was, as they say, an “early adopter once again

I called it the News Dissector after the on-air title I used as a radio newscaster back in the 1970’s on WBCN. I wanted to offer a counter-narrative to the news as well as a critique of it.

I was off and running in what was being called “New Media.” I had gone online in 1986, so in Internet years, I was already an old man, I was trying to adapt to the promise of this new technology, but was still as interested in filmmaking and traditional formats. Once again, I was living in more than one world.

What became clear, was that my interest in the editorial potential of new media was being dwarfed by all the avaricious young entrepreneurs who only saw and cared about the promise of a financial windfall.

With financing from Wall Street, investors, and venture funds, hundreds of millions were invested in endless schemes. Everyone was making gobs of money, until they weren’t.

The new media crash foreshadowed the much more serious financial meltdown to come, as investors left the uncertainties of the web world for the bricks and mortar world of a housing market that they believed would, and could, only go up in value. I would soon be tracking that story.

The New Century and Some Old Issues

The year 2000 brought us to a new millennium, although some debated whether it started at the year’s start or end. There were fears of a computer meltdown and the beginning of a Presidential election as the new century moved in to stay.

2000 was the year of the Florida fiasco. Like so many others, I was shocked that the candidate with the most votes lost the election. There was something big going on that the media was mostly missing. I started writing about it and later did a book with Roland Schatz, *Hail to the Thief—Meritocracy*, arguing that media misreporting was partly responsible for what happened.

I later made a film with Faye Anderson for Globalvision, *Counting on Democracy*, narrated by Ruby Dee and her late husband, Ossie Davis. Making it took me to Florida in search of 180,000 missing votes.

July 20, 2001: On the Beach in Miami: Searching For Chads in July

I have a problem. I just can’t move on. And, not because I am partisan

either. It is Wednesday night and this must be South Beach, Miami, F.L.A. My colleague Faye Anderson points across the street at the beach reminding me that that was where Al Gore and Joe Lieberman staged their Presidential campaign “victory rally” last November 6th. It was there, on the eve of the election, where they literally made their last stand in the sand. It became their last hurrah at the water’s edge. An unseen wave was about to drown their campaign.

No one there imagined what would happen next, as the vote tallies seesawed, and the vote recount crashed and burned after the Supremes stepped in. For many, it’s still not over. We will see who remembers next November, and in all the Novembers to come.

It was across the street in the pricey restaurants and art deco hotels where it all ended up as unrest reverted to discontent and Miami quickly eased back into its role as a tourist Mecca and shopping center for Latin America. At night, every night, the strip is packed with scantily clad women wearing clothes that seem sprayed on, and minions of male gawkers marching in lock step in a nightly parade up and down Ocean Drive.

In the muggy humidity of mid-July, the 2000 Presidential election seems a long way away, a long time ago.

Over an overpriced coffee at the News Cafe, the place the designer Versace went for his caffeine on the morning of his untimely demise, I watched the morning sun begin to turn another Florida day into an oven. I noted that Al Gore was back in the Miami Herald. An AP story reports that he is opening a new office in Nashville, “exploring his options,” and finally getting around to thanking his supporters who have gone unappreciated for seven months now as he and Tipper struggled to “get over it.” His hardcore hometown faithful have already begun shouting “Gore in 04,” although I didn’t find much enthusiasm here for the candidate the Republicans baited as “Looserman.” After sifting through the debris and details of what actually happened in Florida during the election and its aftermath, it seems clear that he is as responsible for his loss as his more determined adversaries. Although there is more to it -- of course. Much more! More to investigate and more to report.

Yesterday, I met two of the media “recouters” still focused on trying to figure out what happened at the polls the last time around. At the Palm

Beach Post, reporters Joel Engelhart and Scott McCabe showed me their award-winning ballot-by-ballot analysis of why Gore would have won had the Butterfly Ballot not confused so many voters. Their detailed re-examination of the actual votes showed how screwed up the balloting was, and how as many as 6600 voters wanted Gore but ended up with their votes tossed into the garbage can along with 174,000 others.

Did you have any idea how many votes were discounted rather than counted because the people were never adequately educated about how to vote?

Their inquiry also showed how 10-11000 so-called undervotes also favored Gore. These were folks who didn't make their choice clear enough. The recent New York Times belated investigation of the ballot fiasco showed how a few hundred votes went to Bush because political shenanigans made the difference. Judge Charles Burton of Palm Beach, who we all saw overseeing a recount that the Florida Secretary of State's Office rejected as too late, told me point blank: "The whole process was politicized."

Yet Gore, who conceded so wimpishly, has barely raised the larger issue of voters rights, still not fully secure here, or in many others states. An MIT-Cal Tech study has estimated that as many as six million votes went uncounted nationwide last year. We learned that the definitive media recount would be out in September.

That recount would not be released until March of the next year, too late to have any impact. It was also confused and confusing with many contradictory interpretations. The New York Times reporter who ran it told me bluntly that it found Gore had won the most votes. When I asked why his paper did not report that clearly, he shrugged.

Going to Florida put me face to face with the newsmakers I had seen on TV.

My report from West Palm Beach:

WEST PALM BEACH, FLORI-DUH

It was déjà vu all over again. Wandering into West Palm Beach and entering buildings I remember so well from the saturated TV coverage of the election. It felt like I had been here before.

Six months ago, this town was in the eye of a political hurricane, the center of an electoral storm that continues to hang over our country. That story remains an indictment of our voting system and the media coverage that failed to project the crisis that was unfolding, in part, because it was part of it.

Six months later, Florida is back to “normal,” but the memory and stench has not gone away. Earlier today, I wandered into the offices of the Election Commission. And there she was, Teresa Lapore, in person. The famous for 36 days supervisor who presided over the butterfly ballot farce that was one of the factors that cost Al Gore the Presidency.

I was here making an investigative film, *Counting on Democracy*, that Globalvision was producing with journalist Fay Anderson. We thought we would try to have a look at the “sample” ballot that her office had distributed before the election because we had heard it had little resemblance to the real ballot that confused as many as 6600 people.

“Sorry,” we were told but they don’t have any more copies of the sample. All gone! Documents in this “Sunshine” state have a way of going even further south despite one of the best sunshine laws in the country. Local newspapers reported today that the State’s Democrats are calling for an investigation of some data base records that now seem to have gone missing from Secretary of State Katherine Harris’s office. We would have asked the elusive Ms Harris about this, but, despite calls, letters, and emails, we received no response to our requests for an interview.

Some reporters have been more successful with smaller queries. For example, one recent report revealed that Presidential First Brother Jeb Bush used state telephones to talk to his brother and various campaign workers during the events in November, a clear no-no under laws designed to keep partisan politics off the state payroll. When the disclosure surfaced, Jeb was unavailable for comment, but his staff revealed that he later personally reimbursed Floridians for the price of the calls. His check came to \$5.11.

So, at times, investigative reporting can have an impact. That is less likely for a bigger story like the recent New York Times investigation of the absentee ballot issue, which also went missing in most media accounts, (save Jake Tapper in Salon), until now. The Times story took what was considered an ancillary problem and showed how the Republicans out-organized the

Democrats on that front to bolster G.W. Bush's vote total while politicizing the military along the way, perhaps illegally.

Good for the Times--except, all of these disclosures and media recounts tend to be isolated from each other so it is hard to see any larger patterns. The Washington Post just announced that the main media recount, not the USA Today one, not the Miami Herald one, would not be out for months. Also, they have all concluded that Bush would have won. But, as far as I know, no recount has counted the folks who couldn't vote, were purged, and over-voted. So all these conclusions have to be taken with many grains of salt.

Perhaps the most disturbing study not undertaken by any journalist was just completed by MIT. It concluded that as many as 6 million votes went uncounted in the 2000 elections. Six million! Another study by a House committee, predictably dismissed as "partisan" by the let's move on and get over it club, showed that low-income communities nationwide have more problems voting than more affluent neighborhoods. I am confident that radio's RUSH is not too worried about this. He just celebrated winning the largest contract in radio history \$250 million!

Some of these problems are deeply institutionalized. There is a sign outside Ms. Lapore's well-photographed office. It says simply that voting in Florida closes at 7 PM. Rules like this are there to exclude low-income working class voters.

As one local Democratic Party official admitted to us today, "voting in Florida has been fucked up for a long time."

Duh.

Soon, as the NY Times put it, the axis of news that turned with the question of "who won" was replaced by "who cares?" The reason: a far bigger news event rocked our world.

911

September 11th was a beautiful day. The sky was bluer than blue. And then, when the twin towers were struck and fell, it seemed to be raining blood. Soon chaos was in command.

I wrote about it while it was happening from Globalvision's offices in Times Square. We didn't have a TV. I was listening to the radio and reading eyewitness accounts on the web.

THE FIRST BLOG, SEPTEMBER 11, 2001

“America under Attack”: Guilty or Not, Here We Come

Walking home through empty streets, as New York shut down early on the day of the World Trade Towers apocalypse, I was struck by how dazed and stunned people seemed. There was an eerie silence punctuated by ambulances and police cars racing from place to place. Cops guarded post offices, police stations, and the bus terminal, as if the terrorists would be back. The mayor gave press conferences from a “secret location” as if the Osama bin Laden brigade had targeted him, clearly a conceit wrapped up as a security consideration.

I had spent the morning following events on the web and radio. At home, I was finally able to experience the day's turmoil, that many media outlets were saying had “changed America forever,” the way most Americans were—on TV. I watched for five hours, jumping from channel to channel, network to network. It was, of course, wall-to-wall catastrophe, with each outlet featuring its own “exclusive coverage.” Some credited others, but each with somewhat distinctive angles of the same scene, jet planes tearing through the World Trade Center. And, when we weren't seeing that horrendous image being recycled endlessly, used as what we in the TV business used to call “wallpaper” or B-roll, other equally compelling images were on the screen. I saw the Pentagon on fire, huge clouds of smoke coming out of the buildings, buildings collapsing, people jumping from high floors and running in the streets. It was on for hours, over and over again, awakening outrage, and then oddly numbing it by overexposure.

The reporting focused first on the facts, the chronology of planes hijacked and national symbols attacked. Then, the parade of “expert” interviews began, featuring virtually the same group of former government officials and terrorism specialists on each show. Even Ronald Reagan's favorite novelist, Tom Clancy, was given airtime to bang the drum for giving the military and CIA everything it says it will need to strike back. He was on no doubt because for many, these events seemed like a case of reality catching up with fiction.

You could imagine the show bookers all working overtime from the same Rolodex, shuttling these pundits-for-all-seasons from studio to studio, from CNN to Jim Lehrer's News Hour, to CBS and back again. How many times have we seen these sound-alike sound bite artists like former Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger and generals like Norman Schwarzkopf waxing tough for the cameras? They were itching for "action."

I heard no one saying that violence breeds violence or that a massive retaliation may only invite more of the same. The only critical edge to the coverage involved raising the question about why so many official predictions about imminent terrorist threats went unheeded for so long. These concerns were raised, but just as quickly sidelined by discussions of national complacency and/or naïveté about the world. How the U.S. intelligence apparatus could have missed this was taken only as evidence that it needs more money, not a different policy. No mention was made of the cutbacks in international news coverage that kept so many Americans so out of touch with global events.

Suddenly, we had moved from the stage of facts to the realm of opinion and endless speculation about what America would do, and then, to what America MUST do. The anchors were touched when members of Congress spontaneously erupted into a bipartisan rendition of "God Bless America" on the Capitol steps. They paused reverentially to go live to the White House for a presidential address that turned out to be five minutes of banalities and rally-round-the-flag reassurances. Who was it that called patriotism the last refuge of scoundrels? The news anchors certainly never used that line.

Missing was any discussion of the possible motives of the alleged terrorists. Why did they do it and why now? What was their political agenda? There was no mention of September 11th as the anniversary of the failed Camp David accords. There was certainly no mention of the fact that State terrorism by countries, be they the U.S., Russia, Iraq, Afghanistan, or Israel often trigger and harden counterterrorism by guerrilla forces. There was virtually no international angle offered in most of the coverage except a few snatches of file footage of Osama bin Laden fondling an AK-47. Bin Laden looked like a cartoon figure, like Ali Baba in cartoons from my youth, not the insane militant terrorist that he is. It must be said that most of the journalists I saw were cautious about attributing the attack to him, perhaps because of early blame placed on Arabs for the Oklahoma City bombing, which turned out to be the work of an American.

NBC carried the only substantive report I saw about why Palestinians consider America complicit in the attacks against them. It did mention that Hamas and bin Laden denied involvement and even featured a condemnation of the violence by Arafat. That was reported by the always-excellent Martin Fletcher, a Brit who is as informed about what is happening on the ground there, as most of the anchors and reporters here seem not to be. I saw one other sound bite from a Middle Eastern politician, a call to arms from Ariel Sharon, and a message of resolve from Tony Blair. That was it for foreign response. CNN carried eerie videophone footage of an attack on an arms depot in Kabul, Afghanistan, but it turned out not to be connected. Some on-air reporter explained that it might have been part of that country's ongoing civil war. Another replied, "Oh, are they having one?"

As the coverage wore on, George Stephanopoulos, ex-President Clinton's former boy wonder, now an ABC commentator, popped up with Peter Jennings to explain, on the basis of his experience on the inside, that in situations like this, governments need a scapegoat and someone to demonize, and predicted they'd find one, fast! Jennings, to his credit, reminded viewers that in the past our counterattacks against terrorist incidents were hardly triumphant. He and the other national anchors were far more restrained and cautious than the local stations. The flashes of responsibility that seeped through the appeals to national resolve impressed me.

Also missing was much discussion of the economic consequences, although on ABC there was the suggestion that this event might send the world economy into a recession, as if we were not already in one. Oil prices went up today and the exchanges were closed. Later, on the same network, Diane Sawyer brought this aspect home by holding up some financial documents that littered the streets. You got a sense of how serious this was through the constant replay of a phone number for employees of Morgan Stanley, the investment bank that was the largest tenant in the World Trade Center. If they lost top managers and key employees, as was likely, this will have an economic impact.

It was only back on PBS, in one of Jim Lehrer's interminable beltway blather sessions that one got an inkling of what the Bush administration may actually be planning to do once the final fatality count sinks in and the sadness of the funerals and mourning begins. Then, as everyone expects, Americans will go from shock to outrage. One of Lehrer's mostly conservative experts, Bill Kristol, editor of Rupert Murdoch's Weekly Standard, passed on a high-level leak, namely that the U.S. will link bin Laden to Saddam Hussein.

So there it was, the big secret that Iraq was the target. Kristol, a part of the neo-conservative led Project for a New American Century, let the cat out of the bag, but no one picked it up or followed up, not even Jim Lehrer. He didn't even realize what a scoop he had. Soon, Kristol, in his magazine and frequent TV appearances, would go from disclosing what the administration would do, to becoming a cheerleader for the policy that it was implementing, a policy he helped influence.

Recall that the President said he would "punish" states harboring terrorists. No one really spent much time discussing what that meant. Now Rupert's emissary was predicting that the game plan might be to ask for a declaration of war against Iraq to "finish the job." The next morning, the demagogic face of Murdochworld summed up its feelings with a headline from a New York Post column written by Steve Dunleavy that called for the bombing of Kabul and legalizing assassinations. It said, "SIMPLY KILL THESE BASTARDS!" There was no discussion of any evidence implicating Iraq, or explanation of the economics of the oil situation there, which U.S. companies currently tap in abundance. You can bet that as this terrible tragedy is formally cranked up into an ongoing national crisis, there will be even more calls for war. Failing economies often need to rely on a good one to get back on track.

So, is another Gulf War in the offing? Will Son of Bush finish his father's failed Desert Storm? That is a real possibility, suggesting also that more media manipulation is on the way. The coverage on Tuesday night was tilting in the direction of whipping up the outrage with no alternatives to war even discussed.

This possible "Let's Get Iraq" scenario wasn't discussed in any depth, perhaps because there is no footage to show yet. But, you heard it here first; the road to revenge may just take us back to Baghdad, guilty or not. Will international terrorism be wiped out then? Will we then get the faceless "them"? It was a bit frightening to hear many of the on-air wise men speak of the next steps as a long difficult struggle that will take national resolve and may lead to restrictions on the freedoms we have long-prized. This line of thinking could well lead to an antiterrorist campaign targeting domestic protesters as well. Historians will recall that the mysterious fire in Germany's Reichstag set the stage for the rationalizations used in the Nazi terror. Will God then bless America only when the cruise missiles start flying? I thought only the bad guys spoke in terms of holy war.

Stay tuned.

P.S.: I must admit that I share much of the popular emotional outrage at the carnage. If we could have afforded it, we might have had an office there. In fact, I used to work out of CNN's bureau when it was based at the World Trade Center and have been in and out of those towers over the years. It is terrifying and traumatizing to realize that they are gone, like one giant bloody amputation from the body of the city. This was not just an attack on symbols, but on real people, not just world capitalism. I am, I realize, in a kind of shock, working on automatic pilot. It is at least something to do.

We Are Family

Ten days after the towers came down, a group of musicians in New York led by Nile Rodgers decided to respond with a remake of his hit "We Are Family" as way of calling for an end to hate crimes and for tolerance and global understanding. Tom Silverman called to tell me that Spike Lee was making the music video and asked if I would document the event and make a film about it as I had with Sun City. No one was sure who would turn up or how it would turn out. Of course, I agreed. Soon our Globalvision family was organizing a major shoot and making plans for what turned into a feature length documentary later shown at Sundance and on TV. At a time of fear and depression, working on this project not only gave me a chance to "flip the script" of war and retaliation that the administration was promoting, but find a way to help and find some hope and purposeful work.

We leapt at a chance to get involved even though we didn't know what to expect. I feared it might turn into another feel-good celebrity ego session. After all, here in one room was Diana Ross, Patti Labelle, Dionne Warwick, and a whole list of greats. I was wrong. The singing and sense of solidarity one felt was transcendent. It renewed me spiritually in much the same way it did many of the participants, who spoke about how a collective effort like this was a chance to be at once positive and celebrate America's values of multicultural expression. The money they hoped to raise was to benefit organizations promoting tolerance and defending our freedoms. Not enough attention was being paid to this, especially in the media.

The hope was that having so many high-profile people would give these issues more momentum. The stars get attention; hence, we would be able

to help the culture heal. Yet it never quite works out that way because our cynical media has a love-hate relationship with the celebrity world. All too often, media outlets that devote acres of print to detailing their most trivial pursuits turn into attack dogs when some aspire to take a stand or transcend the acting or singing roles they are confined in.

The New York Times reported on March 10 that magazines that once manufactured celebrities now just want to use them for their own purposes. But, when celebrities have their own ideas — or any ideas at all — they often get put down as if they know nothing about the issues. Bono told me recently that his motives were called into question when he started campaigning for debt relief. It was only after he met with the Pope that he began to be treated as someone who knew what he was talking about.

Much of the press prefers celebrities to be one-dimensional court jesters and entertainers, not citizens with concerns who want to play a role in our cultural and political life. This is especially true of people who do not have the imprimatur of a current hit record or a big media brand behind them with bucks to buy ads in their publications. Don't ever think that quid pro quos don't exist between the entertainment industry and the media outlets they own and control. At the same time, not all celebrities do check their egos or agendas at the door.

Ego Wars

And so, it might have been predicted that something would go awry. And it did on the very first day, when comedienne Joan Rivers, who had agreed to take part, reversed herself and went on the radio and to the press with exaggerated charges that she had been duped because the list of original beneficiaries the organizers initially hoped to support had been diversified. Known for a big mouth and punchy one-liners, Rivers attacked the project, and in doing so freaked out the people who had worked so hard to organize it.

As a result of her aggressive and visible stance, other stars dropped out, wanting to avoid getting tarnished. Her verbal assault turned a gesture of compassion into the kind of controversy the tabloids love, a food fight among celebrities.

Fortunately, the show went on, but Rivers reaped as much publicity as the project did. She understood how to orchestrate media attention her way. When pressed by one of the organizers, Bryan Bantry, to reconsider, she

reportedly told him, with his aide listening in on the conference call, “Fuck World Peace.” Later Nile Rodgers would say, “if we had world peace, 9/11 wouldn’t have happened.”

Dealing with outsized egos is one of the drawbacks of relying on big names who can often be mercurial, self-promoting, insincere, and are so used to be coddled and sucked up to that they can’t function without “their people” present. Their personalities also tend to draw more attention than the causes they promote. I raise this only because this tempest in a teapot was nevertheless part of the story that I documented. There was no time to include the episode in a shortened version of the film that played at the Sundance Film Festival, but as a journalist, I thought it had to be part of the feature-length film. I was more interested in how the people running the project handled a defection in their ranks than in the actual content of the inanities she supposedly uttered.

On March 4, we showed the film for the first time. The story of Rivers’ refusal to take part, the epithets she used, and Nile Rodgers’ response were included. Rodgers was more disappointed than angry, and said she was “entitled to own her own feelings.” After the event, Fox’s Roger Friedman ran into Rivers at Elaine’s, an East Side watering hole patronized by celebrities. He would later write a positive review of the film, but also reported that Rivers was furious to hear that she was in the film and vehemently denied having ever said “Fuck World Peace,” even though two publicists on the project heard her. Those are not words you forget. Anyway, Friedman asked her what she did remember saying. She now says she said, “Fuck the Muslims” and “Fuck the terrorists.” In reporting on this, Friedman used “expletive” rather than “fuck.” We later confirmed with him that his account was accurate, but then, just to make sure, called Rivers to see what she would say.

Instead of responding to our questions, Ms. Rivers called in the attack dogs. She contacted her lawyer, who sent Nile Rodgers a letter threatening legal action, claiming the depiction was false, “disparaging, defamatory, and put Ms. Rivers in a bad light.” Here she is, a public figure who used her access to the media and celebrity to disparage and undermine “We Are Family,” now demanding an apology and using a big law firm with offices in eight cities to bully and intimidate us into to self-censoring the film.

We decided to apologize by noting what she now claims she did say, the

bit about Muslims, but would not buckle on what struck us as a demand to censor our views. “We Are Family,” by the way, is a call for tolerance and speaks out against the hate crimes that irresponsible hotheads who say “Fuck the Muslims” intentionally or unintentionally inspire.

Her threats provoked a debate in our own ranks because we believe that even though the claims she made were baseless and would be thrown out of court, according to the president of the American Civil Liberties Union whom I consulted, she is rich enough and possibly annoyed enough to sue. That’s my opinion anyway. A lawsuit would also force us to spend money we didn’t have defending ourselves. This is the scary part. We were then faced with the question of how much risk we could afford to absorb in standing up for our rights and artistic vision. At the same time, we knew that the more the issue becomes about what Joan Rivers did or did not say, it will end up unintentionally promoting her status and help her pander to the lowest common denominator, which has often been her stock and trade. She may be a funny woman, but the joke would be on us.

Many of my colleagues felt the hassle was not worth it and that her stance, which distracted public support once already, threatened to do so again. The sad truth is we could not get E&O (errors and omissions) insurance to defend the film if we were sued. When an insurer suspects that there is a problem, they decline to get involved. So, we were left with the choice of putting our company at risk by doing what we felt was fair and accurate.

The result, to my shame and displeasure as a documentarian, was that we cut her out of the story altogether. The pragmatists won the day, but at least I have this outlet to tell the story that the film could not because of these pressures. She may be able to use her show biz clout against the film, but as far as I know, a columnist still has a right to express an opinion and dissect a controversy. Not everyone has this type of an outlet, so incidents like this, which happen every day, are rarely brought to light.

This fight turned out not to be that important to anyone but Ms. Rivers and I. More upsetting were some of the reviews. We couldn’t afford to hold press screenings so we sent out cassettes, which I am told never get the same attention from critics because they are not watching the film with an audience or necessarily in a quiet space.

Since the movie is about music and a message, it tends to fall in the cracks

between film buffs oriented toward dramas or traditional docs, and music critics who don't focus on the quality of the film or its message. More important, here in New York, we have had an overload of September 11th coverage and this film falls outside the usual treatment the issue receives, which focuses more on what happened than what it meant for our culture.

Many entertainers had raised money for the established causes, but this project goes beyond that. It captures the effect of the attacks, but in a far more personal way, and calls for tolerance, not a theme widely echoed in the media. I know it is always bad form to respond to reviewers, but as a media writer, I am very conscious of how stories get misrepresented. Now that it has happened to me, I can't just shut up without talking back and let the chips fall where they may. The truth is that whatever one's taste or sensibility, accuracy is at least a standard everyone would agree on. What surprised me was that three critics didn't seem to know what the film was about and ventilated instead about their negative feelings toward the motives of the artists. The New York Times sent a music critic who pans them more than the movie. The Daily News falsely pictured it as a film about Spike Lee's movie, which it clearly is not. The Village Voice praised it with a faint damn.

Murdoch's Post, which amplified Joan Rivers' original denunciation of "We Are Family" because it made good copy back in September in its ongoing culture war against all progressive ideas, compared the artists — I love this — to the Manson Family. I guess that is what happens when you deviate from the script on how we all were supposed to understand what happened on September 11th and how to feel about it. Now that "patriotic correctness" is in, the solidarity of "We Are Family" is apparently off message.

Curiously, Fox reviewer Roger Friedman, working for the one outlet I would have expected to be hostile, and that's my stereotype at work, was supportive. "The film... is wonderful. It is a must-see experience for everyone interested in the effects of 9/11. Go see it, and if it's not playing in your town soon, ask your local small movie house to get it." Go figure!

At the same time, the real goal of "We Are Family" was to promote the ideas we were singing about—and we did that by getting the doc seen. Niles and his running mate Nancy Hunt went on to launch the We Are Family Foundation that has backed innovative videos and educational programs.

We did get a ten-minute ovation at the Sundance Film Festival. It was there I also ran into film director John Waters, who confirmed to me that the civil rights “dance-in” I helped organize when I was in the civil rights movement in Baltimore—a story told in the *More You Watch*—was the inspiration for his film *Hairspray*.

A Time of War

The events of 9/11 would lead inexorably to wars and the subordination of the media to promoting them. I became obsessed with the issues this raised and turned out two books.

The first, *Media Wars* (Rowman, Littlefield), focused on the news in a time of terror, and the second, *Embedded: Weapons of Mass Deception* (Prometheus Books), was written while the invasion of Iraq was underway and documented my concerns with the media coverage. *Embedded* was the first book out on the war, but perhaps because the media is always sensitive to calling attention to its own flaws, it was largely ignored.

Later, major news organizations like *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post* would publish mea culpas, admitting that they had been seduced by the war and misreported many key facts involving WMD’s and other issues.

The coverage led me to the view that many media outlets were co-conspirators in the war and were themselves guilty of war crimes. I made a documentary using my critique, *WMD: Weapons of Mass Deception*, which did get exposure in theatrical screenings and on TV broadcasts worldwide.

I wrote a book following up on the issues and discussing the politics of my own documentary filmmaking. *When News Lies: Media Complicity and the Iraq War* (Select Books) included the script and the book.

In many ways, these last years have meant non-stop media making and media critiquing. My daily blog is usually about 3000 words, a virtual daily newspaper filled with links and comments from readers. I do it every day because that’s the best way to build an audience, a lesson I learned on the radio.

In the interim, I have been crisscrossing the world to festivals and media conferences from China to South Africa, to Indonesia and Kazakhstan, to Doha and Dubai. It’s sometimes hard to assess whether all of this activity,

some of it measured, and some frenetic, has had an impact. I would like to think it contributes to the search for truth and a better world.

Like many Indy media makers, we often feel underfunded and marginalized. Keeping the company going has been an uphill battle for all of us. We lost the lease to our Times Square offices and had to downsize into small digs in the Garment District. My late grandfather and dad, both garment workers, struggled and fought to get out of the neighborhood that I was now fighting to get into.

Over the years, PBS became in our view less relevant and many of the foundations that supported us had changed their priorities. Even as it became clear that our media was harming our democracy, funders cut back on their support for cutting-edge media projects in a climate of self-censorship and risk adverse executives.

When we started Globalvision, we thought it would be easier once we built our reputation and a track record, but instead, with more media consolidation and repressive policies by government, it had become harder to survive. Who knows what the future will bring?

I have considered myself part of this media biz in one-way or another since my high school days. I have been a reporter, editor, author, radio newscaster, TV reporter and producer, and website editor. I make films and write blogs. I have tried to do it all which is probably not such a good idea, but that's who I am. Getting on the air and seeing my work in print on many websites reminds me that at least I am trying. I am still an activist and advocate as well.

In Mid 2005, I turned away from the war issue and back to a consideration of the prospects of changing the media. Melville House Publishers invited me to write my own manifesto, which I did, *The Death of the Media and the Fight for Democracy*. It is a small format book with lots of big ideas and suggestions for how to build a media and democracy movement. It was my eighth Book in the last 8 years.

In 2004, I was fortunate to find an investor who wanted to back another film, and that year I finished *In Debt We Trust: America Before the Bubble Bursts*. I chose the issue because it documents a problem that goes beyond partisan, age, racial, and economic divides.

CNN seemed to appreciate that writing on August 5 of that year:

“New film takes swipe at debt problem:

In Debt We Trust takes hard look at debt casualties who declare bankruptcy and the marketing practices of credit cards issuers.”

NEWYORK (CNNMoney.com)-- With Americans seemingly overwhelmed by mortgages, credit cards, and automobile loans, it seems like everyone has something to say about the state of consumer debt in America nowadays.

A new documentary, “In Debt We Trust: America Before the Bubble Bursts,” offers its own take on debt in America looking not only at some of its casualties, but also the financial institutions that one expert says have created a “21st century serfdom.”

So here I am, still a media “insurgent” —from the 1960’s to age 60.

I am not the only one who is still at it. When Tina Turner, who I profiled for ABC’s 20/20 news magazine, was asked, “when are you going to slow down?” she responded:

“I don’t know. I am just getting started.”

3. WHEN MEDIA UNDERMINES DEMOCRACY

American democracy is at risk. Our freedoms are threatened. Our political process is in danger. Sound the alarm.

For years, warnings like this have appeared in our media. Sometimes they are shouted at us in thundering editorials. Often they have tried to persuade us in reasoned columns and commentaries, raging at political turns of events with onerous implications. This is what the media is for, to serve as a fire bell in the night, a guardian and watchdog.

The founders of the American experiment in self-rule conferred a constitutional mandate on the media by assuring the rights of a free press. The courts have mostly upheld it. “Paramount among the responsibilities of a free press is the duty to prevent any part of the government deceiving the people,” wrote Supreme Court Justice Hugo L. Black.

That’s the theory anyway.

Words like “duty” and “responsibility” seem oddly quaint today, as if they are throwbacks to an earlier time, in what was, perhaps, another country. Today, many of our most trenchant critics warn that the most serious threat to democracy is coming from the very press charged with protecting it.

Put simply, our media is undermining democracy, and in some ways, they have displaced it with a “mediaocracy”—rule by the agenda-setting power of privately owned media corporations. Unfortunately, this is one headline rarely in the news.

Not just liberals, but conservatives like Edward Luttwak realize this too, asking at a 2004 Arts and Ideas Festival at Yale, “can democracy survive the media?” He and other critics point to the lack of diversity of viewpoints in news reporting and shrinking substantive issue-oriented coverage during elections. They note that the focus on polls and personalities leads to what media critics call “agenda cutting,” that is, weaning the public off factual issues and policy choices, and by doing so, depoliticizing politics. The result is growing cynicism and the

tuning out of politics altogether.

So concludes Roland Schatz of Media Tenor, a media firm that studies political coverage in many different countries. “The people’s reaction to this is to turn their backs on the ballot boxes. The party of non-voters has grown to become the most important group in all Western democracies, a fact that has not been given sufficient attention by the media.” That may be because it is the media itself that is encouraging this anti-democratic trend.

There are libraries full of very good books documenting how this has happened. Most explain how market logic tends to drive out public interest obligations. They show through case studies and well-documented narratives how news has been sanitized, journalists censored, and important stories suppressed. They have described a merger of news business and show business in an era of a growing concentration of ownership that has led to a “dumbing down” of content. They decry packaging over substance and claim that we are in a “post journalism” era where information is a commodity, but facts no longer matter.

They describe the ever-increasing transformation of the news into a corporate commodity. Thoughtful newspaper editors like Jon Carroll fear that corporate ownership is eroding the quality of our newspapers, telling an interviewer, “newspaper-owning corporations—and I mean all of them, not just my own employer—have an unwritten pact with Wall Street that requires unsustainably high profit levels. Each year, newspapers shed reporters, editors, photographers, designers, and news whole. Each year, readers get less. Each year many of those readers turn elsewhere for their news.”

Media workers, especially journalists, know how seductive this corporate pressure and its corollary, creeping personal co-optation, can be. Most feel they have few means of resistance. “This is the deepest censorship of the self,” writes the critic John Leonard, “an upward mobility and a downward trajectory.”

Even media moguls like CNN founder Ted Turner now admit that big media is a threat to providing Americans with the news we need. Writing in the *Washington Monthly*, he turns on the industry he was once part of. He writes, “these big companies are not antagonistic; they do billions of

dollars in business with each other. They don't compete; they cooperate to inhibit competition. You and I have both felt the impact. I felt it in 1981, when CBS, NBC, and ABC all came together to try to keep CNN from covering the White House. You've felt the impact over the past two years, as you saw little news from ABC, CBS, NBC, MSNBC, Fox, or CNN on the FCC's [Federal Communications Commission] actions.

In early 2003, the Pew Research Center found that 72 percent of Americans had heard "nothing at all" about the proposed FCC rule changes. Why? One never knows for sure, but it must have been clear to news directors that the more they covered this issue, the harder it would be for their corporate bosses to get the policy result they wanted. A few media conglomerates now exercise a near-monopoly over television news."

On the occasion of CNN's 25th anniversary in June 2005 Turner told a reunion of staffers that he yearned for a "return to a little more international coverage on the domestic feed and a little more environmental coverage, and maybe, a little less of the pervert of the day."

At a time when technology permits robust communication and citizen participation, big media has tended to become more hierarchal and top-down. Profit making has become its primary mission and its programming is often designed to maximize that goal and that goal alone. Its method is monologue, not dialogue, even as new gimmicks, including audience voting by phone and Internet chat, provide the illusion of viewer involvement.

If these domineering trends are leading to the domination of the mass media by a small cartel of giant corporate conglomerates, the emergence of new technologies and the growing awareness of a need for other voices have made an energetic and more diverse news media more viable. Early on in the history of TV it was decided that TV receivers would be cheap, but broadcast equipment prohibitively expensive. Now, with newly affordable technology, a complete reversal of that traditional content distribution structure is possible.

There's a media war underway between the old school of newspapers, radio stations, TV News, and a new school of Internet-driven

information — the web’s satirical, culturally biting programming, podcasts, and blogs, literally millions of blogs. And now, with audio blogging and video blogging emerging along with low-powered radio, Internet TV is soon to follow. For years, media reformers have not had the means to make their critique. Now they are finally getting the means of distributing it. This is turning the top-down, big media model on its head.

One of the most thoughtful bloggers, Juan Cole, a professor of history at the University of Michigan and an Iraq expert, responded to one critic by contrasting the independent spirit of blogging with the more controlled and sanitized environment of mainstream media, a.k.a., MSM. “The difference is that we are not under the constraints of making a 15% profit.... If we were the mainstream media, (MSM, perhaps better thought of as corporate media), we would care if you threatened to stop reading us. Because although we might be professional news people, we would have the misfortune to be working for corporations that are mainly about making money. We would be ordered to try to avoid saying anything too controversial (and I don’t mean “Crossfire” controversial), because we would be calculating what would bring in 15% profits per annum on our operating capital. Would hours and hours of television “reportage” and discussion of Michael Jackson or of Terri Schiavo or Scott Peterson (remember?) bring in viewers and advertising dollars? Then that is what we would be giving the public. Bread and circuses.”

As society fragments along demographic lines and political differences, there’s been a much commented-upon political polarization, but there has also been a far less-noticed cultural divide. On American television, a right-wing campaign to denigrate the never-very-liberal media is used as a tactic to build audiences for Fox News and conservative-dominated talk radio. Its strategists know that in the absence of real competition on the left, viewers can be lured to outlets offering extreme and simplistic diatribes if they are wrapped in patriotism and populist rhetoric. The result is that viewers turn to media outlets they think they agree with, but perhaps not necessarily because they espouse conservative values, so much as because these outlets express their estrangement from middle of the road politics.

The campaign to discredit centrist and liberal media has had an effect largely through repetitive attacks by politicians and pundits on what

is inaccurately branded as the “liberal media elite.” John Podhoretz, the journalist credited with coining the phrase, later admitted he made it up because it played well with the conservative base, not because it was true. This media bashing campaign, echoed on talk radio and news panel shows, has had its intended effect.

A 2005 State of Media Study found, “the public’s evaluations of media credibility are more divided along ideological and partisan lines. Republicans have become more distrustful of virtually all major media outlets over the past four years, while Democratic evaluations of the news media have been mostly unchanged. As a result, only about half as many Republicans as Democrats rate a variety of well-known news outlets as credible, a list that includes ABC News, CBS News, NBC News, NPR, PBS’s NewsHour with Jim Lehrer, the New York Times, Newsweek, Time, and U.S. News and World Report.”

A Pew Center study confirmed this, noting, “Credibility ratings for the major broadcast and cable television outlets have fallen somewhat in recent years, due in large part to increased cynicism toward the media on the part of Republicans and conservatives. CNN no longer enjoys the top spot as the most credible TV news source; it is now in a statistical tie with CBS’s 60 Minutes. From 1996 to 2002, CNN was viewed as the most believable broadcast or cable outlet, but its ratings have fallen gradually over time. Today 32% of those able to rate CNN say they can believe all or most of what they see on the cable network. This is down from 37% in 2002, 39% in 2000, and a high of 42%.”

Ironically, more progressive media critics were, in the same period, lambasting major media outlets for not being liberal at all, or even liberal enough, as they ignored economic gaps and downplayed issues of gender, class, and race. They complained that there were more news programs but less real news. Their more critical voices were soon heard only at university seminars or in the journalism reviews. Their critique of the mainstream turning into a mud stream was largely ignored on the broadcast spectrum or relegated to programs with small audiences.

At the same time, the commercial news industry was reformulating the news with shorter story counts, less overseas reporting, and shortened story length. As content became shallower, presentation became more cluttered. What was so liberal with the spread of show biz values,

and celebrity? Nothing of course—but this labeling became part of the political polarization of the period, a process used to build large audiences on the basis of identity and ideology.

Soon there was less and less “hard news” in the news overall. Traditionally, “hard news” refers to coverage of international affairs, politics, and events in Washington, local government, and business and finance. Pew reported, “A smaller group of news consumers, less than a third of the public (31%), consistently focuses on these types of stories.

At the other end of the spectrum, about one-in-ten Americans (13%) do not follow these subjects at all, preferring other kinds of news or no news at all. Over the past eight years, the hard news audience has ranged in size from a low of 24% in 2000 to its current level of 31%, with the increase over the past four years driven largely by the rise in interest in international news. While a minority overall, these hard news enthusiasts make up a majority of the audience for a number of news programs, and express distinctly different attitudes and preferences about what they want in the news.”

This problem has become our challenge.

The challenge of media reformers is not just to critique the logic behind this system but also to envision an alternative, and then, where possible, build it. That’s what some of our most creative software designers are doing with open source technology. That’s what low cost documentary filmmakers are doing, helped by a small army of video and TV producers. They are not only attacking the media system but also becoming a new media.

As so much of mainstream media devolves into a mud stream, old media is losing its grip and appeal. We are in a transition period, but its outlines and possibilities are often more clear to visionaries than ordinary readers and computer users. Alternative media is also facing the challenge of coming up with business models that make it more sustainable.

There is now a growing citizen’s movement that insists that the public has a right to expect more from the media and, in fact, has a right to receive

better media. Media rights? Now that's a new concept. And in fact, in 2005, hundreds of organizations embraced a Bill of Media Rights.

This Bill of Media Rights, written by Jonathan Rintels with input from a coalition of media organizations, states: "According to the Supreme Court, the First Amendment protects the American public's right to 'an uninhibited marketplace of ideas in which truth will prevail' and to 'suitable access to social, political, aesthetic, moral and other ideas and experiences.' Moreover, it insists that it is 'the rights of the viewers and listeners, not the right of the broadcasters, which is paramount.'"

What are the rights of viewers and listeners? Stay tuned—but for now, we need to examine why the present system acts as if viewers and listeners have no rights.

THE PROBLEM OF CONTROL

I grew up in a world of three principal TV networks. Now there are hundreds of channels owned in large part by four principal networks and a handful of other media companies. Digital cable and satellite stations are all competing by offering endless channels and choices. But when you look closely, you find only a handful of companies controlling those cable systems and other conduits. All are driven by the market logic of the bottom line.

And that control has been documented. The top four broadcast networks may have a direct ownership interest in only 25% of the 102 broadcast channels, but as public interest lawyer Marc Cooper of the Consumer Federation of America observed in testimony before Congress, "they have guaranteed access to distribution platforms on television and cable as well as close interconnection through stock ownership and joint ventures with the cable companies that control the remainder of the channels. The joint activities of this cabal have resulted in a video programming market that is a tight oligopoly by all traditional measures of market structure."

Talk of "market structure" or any economic framework like this is missing in most media discussions. Issues get attention but corporate interests rarely do. Few critics examine how decisions about programming, and even the structure and content of news shows, are influenced by a need to insure and advance the parent company's financial interests.

Ironically, concerns about the decline of informed debate in the media has paralleled the growing power and penetration of media. What's missing is called "viewpoint diversity," says Cooper.

This is a convoluted way of saying that companies that own the conduit control its content, preferring programming that reflects their values and interests, and all is aimed at doing well in the marketplace. They don't necessarily mind using shows from many producers as long as their costs can be controlled and profits maximized. What this leads to in real terms is a uniformity of genres and a dominance of entertainment-oriented shows that often have little to do with the public interest. Indeed, they stifle localism and a full range of viewpoints.

This does not necessarily mean that entertainment programming is trivial. Well-elaborated plots, storylines, and characters often do a better job of treating social issues than flatter and less well-funded fact-based programs. The irony is that, in some instances, police dramas or shows like *ER* or *The Sopranos* give far more sophisticated insights into human behavior and political controversies than news and pseudo-documentary shows.

Media historian Robert McChesney—long one of the leading intellectuals trying to understand what's wrong with our media, as well as one of the leading activists trying to change it—reduces much of the media problem to this ownership dynamic and to the idea that media concentration breeds more commercialization and less public discourse.

"The American media system is spinning out of control in a hyper-commercialized frenzy," writes McChesney. "Fewer than ten transnational media conglomerates dominate much of our media; fewer than two dozen account for the overwhelming majority of our newspapers, magazines, films, television, radio, and books. With every aspect of our media culture now fair game for commercial exploitation, we can look forward to the full-scale commercialization of sports, arts, and education, the disappearance of notions of public service from public discourse, and the degeneration of journalism, political coverage, and children's programming under commercial pressure."

This is true, yet it only scratches the surface of the deeper challenge.

When you look back to the time when we had few networks and more diversified ownership, there was still no golden age of democratic media pluralism. Many of the corporate owners shared an ideological outlook. They were loyal to their interests and to those of their advertisers first. The media was often sycophantic to power, hostile to labor, insensitive to minorities, and contemptuous of cultural diversity.

Happily, throughout our history there has been a vibrant tradition of dissent, counter-media, and alternative presses. For example, there were 1,200 Socialist newspapers in America in 1912, run mostly by immigrants. Back then, Edward A. Ross wrote of much of the media of his day: “There is just one deadly damning count against the daily newspaper as it is coming to be, namely, it does not give the news. For all its pretensions, many a daily newspaper is not ‘giving the public what it wants.’ In spite of these widely trumpeted prodigies of costly ‘journalistic enterprise,’ these ferreting reporters and hurrying correspondents, these leased cables and special trains, news, good ‘live’ news, ‘red-hot stuff’ is deliberately being suppressed or distorted. This occurs oftener now than formerly and bids fair to occur yet oftener in the future.”

This is prophetic, for clearly our problem is not a new one. Fortunately, there is something new to help us deal with it, namely, the Internet—offering the most revolutionary range of new alternative media since the invention of the printing press, offering thousands of websites with every possible viewpoint. For remaking the media system requires more than dismantling monopolies. It demands a lively and compellingly presented new culture of participatory media that offers different content, promoting citizenship, not consumerism.

We will never have the kind of democratic media system we need until the public is more aware of the current media’s defects and opts into the process of both demanding changes and creating new channels of discourse. Ultimately, our media challenge is not just about “them,” but also about us. What kind of media will we take part in, create, and be prepared to fight for?

WATCHING DOESN’T MEAN LIKING

It’s a mistake to believe that because people watch what’s on TV, they like what they see. In media, as in politics, we choose among the choices

we are given. It's not surprising that highly produced and well-marketed entertainment shows draw bigger audiences than comparatively lower budget news and documentary programming that lacks star appeal, advertising, and, more critically, on-air promotion.

The masters of media packaging know this, which is why many thirty-second TV commercial cost more than the shows they are broadcast during. Engineering audience interest is itself a science and an art, tapping the creativity and enterprise of advertising professionals.

Our current media is a sales platform, doing more selling than telling. It's powerful, seductive, and highly engineered, through focus groups and the like, to attract and keep audiences by using humor, dramatic story telling, and hyped-up news. It understands that its audiences want and need distractions and diversions from problem-plagued lives and overwork.

(Americans have less leisure time than people in any Western country on earth. Economist Juliet Schor writes in *The Overworked American* that, "the average American today spends 1,949 hours at his or her job. This is 163 hours more than in 1969 and is equal nearly to a whole month of added work in a year.")

This does not mean that the media is just a tool for manipulation—its biggest product is itself, and most of its devotees find pleasure in its offerings. Watching television becomes a habit, a "plug-in drug" in the words of one critic. TV addiction is more pervasive than any other, especially frightening as the programs people watch also program them—influencing their worldview and what they think matters, what they should buy, and whom they should admire. TV doesn't just market products. It markets a culture that is presented as far more affluent than it actually is. And, its greatest achievement is in not calling undue attention to its techniques.

Media guru Marshall McLuhan understood this when he wrote that TV is "pervasively invisible" and does not call attention to its impact. It is just there—like a piece of living room furniture, or an appliance. Perhaps that's why Reagan era FCC Commissioner Mark Fowler compared TV to a "toaster with pictures."

At the same time, an industry that says it prides itself on "giving the

people what they want” is now going through a major transition, because it has discovered that many people don’t want what they are being given. You can only determine what people really want when they have real choice. Though perhaps this disconnect from their viewers’ desire for real choice hasn’t bothered broadcasters until it is too late because their programs exist to sell eyeballs to advertisers, not information to viewers.

Thus, although our media system is very powerful, invasive, and pervasive, it is also fragile, fragmented, and failing, even in its own terms. Just as there is a law of gravity, there are laws of history. Nothing lasts forever. Empires come and empires go. It seemed ironic that in an effort to attract religious viewers, media companies in 2005 began airing films about biblical prophecies concerning the “last days” as if they had some special exemption from the profound changes they were hyping.

We are at the end of an era, the end of media as we have known it.

THE LAST DAYS

I am not the only one with the feeling that we are living in the last days of our media system. Ten years ago, the writer Michael Crichton predicted the “extinction” of mass media in an introduction to the 1995 edition of *Project Censored* (an annual collection of downplayed and suppressed stories). The author of *Jurassic Park* said he wanted to focus on another “dinosaur” on the “road to extinction”: “I am referring to the American media. And I use the term extinction literally. To my mind, it is likely that what we now understand as the mass media will be gone within the next ten years. Vanished without a trace.”

While his prediction may have been off by a few years, he saw what others at the time didn’t, essentially predicting the changes we are now witnessing. More viewers watching cable than network, the growth of satellite channels, a dramatic decline of newspaper circulation, the rise of the Internet, and the proliferation of diverse content, not to mention search engines and the bloggers and other new digital technologies.

Novelist Bruce Sterling has been tracking the death of media, too. He wrote his own call, the “Dead Media” manifesto (Deadmedia.org) about

it, also drawing on dinosaur metaphors. “Our culture is experiencing a profound radiation of new species of media. The centralized, dinosaurian one-too-many media that roared and trampled through the 20th century are poorly adapted to the postmodern technological environment. The new media environment is warm with lumbering toothy digital mammals. It’s all lynxes here, and gophers there, plus big fat venomous webcrawlers, appearing in Pleistocene profusion.”

Interestingly, Sterling also notes, “It’s a rather rare phenomenon for an established medium to die. If media make it past their Golden Vaporware stage, they usually expand wildly in their early days and then shrink back to some protective niche as they are challenged by later and more highly evolved competitors. Radio didn’t kill newspapers, TV didn’t kill radio or movies, video and cable didn’t kill broadcast network TV; they just all jostled around seeking a more perfect application.”

What is key, he says, is “what kind of personal relationships we forge with the many worlds of media, how we use it, how we insure that we are not used by it.” He also makes the following observations:

- Media is an extension of the senses.
- Media is a mode of consciousness.
- Media is extra-somatic memory. It’s crystallization of human thought that survives the death of the individual—generates simulacra. The mechanical reproduction of images is media.
- Media is a means of social interaction.
- Media is a means of command and control.
- Media is the means of civil society and public opinion.
- Media is a means of debate and decision and agit propaganda.

All true and, as ideas, all worthy of debate and discussion

The media-consuming public seems to have an unlimited appetite for new media. It is not just technologies that die, but also our relationships to them. With more to watch and more to experience, attention spans

shrink, diverting our attention away from programming that asks us to care about our society in one way or another. Sometimes those programs are perceived as boring. I used to be a heavy TV watcher. I am no longer. As it dumbed down the news, I began looking elsewhere for more trustworthy sources. Media addiction is no longer a conscious means to an end, if it ever was; today it is a road to a lack of consciousness. News was always a part of the “boob tube” that made a claim to offer edification. No longer.

Increasingly, even as the mainstream media gets slicker, the public that we’ve been told likes what it sees, is turning it off and tuning it out. We know this from surveys that span the political spectrum—far fewer viewers are watching network news programs and far fewer readers are buying newspapers. But these surveys are rarely reported and even more rarely dwelt upon. (In July 2005, several TV networks were demanding Congressional action against rating services like Nielson’s because they didn’t accept their data on shrinking viewing levels.)

The last thing media outlets want to report on is why the public is turning against them. Thus, though the media is designed for “tune-in,” tune-out seems to be the trend.

One recent example from a related field: In the summer of 2005, Sony, a major media company, was caught in a pay-for-play scandal, also known as “payola.” As the New York Times reported: “The finding that gifts were used to help tailor the playlists of many radio stations comes as audiences show signs of rejecting the music choices made by programmers. The iPod and other portable devices have begun cutting into the popularity of radio, and the growth of satellite radio has been putting pressure on the station owners to play a broader range of music.”

This disconnect between what the public really wants and what the TV news programs offer is now leading to anxiety in high places. As recently as July 2005, Broadcasting and Cable Editor Max Robbins observed, “Almost everyone in the game operates in a state of uncertainty. Believe it. A day doesn’t pass by when I don’t hear about one of a long list of news executives with big bull’s-eye targets on their backs.” This volatility breeds demoralization and, often, more risk-averse programming, because when jobs are on the line it’s safer to follow the

pack rather than innovate. Conformity is often the result.

These media scandals seem to be erupting more frequently than political scandals, and the credibility of major media continues to decline. One Pew Center public opinion poll—in one of those rare moments when members of the public were asked for their views—found that as many as 70% of the people asked expressed dissatisfaction with the media. Nearly 70% were angry, but for different reasons. Nearly half think the media is too left wing—not surprising after years of the Republican Party’s punditocracy trashing the so-called “liberal media.” The other half blames the right wing for souring them on media, pointing to Fox News and a tendency for big media to defer to big government.

In the general public, there are a growing number of complaints as MSM insiders puzzle over slipping ratings and why young people are abandoning news networks for comedy channels to get their news. In other words, there is unquestionably a growing anti-media attitude in the culture at large at the very time that media institutions seem to be more powerful than ever.

Linda Foley, who runs the Newspaper Guild, a union of newspaper reporters, sees hostility to big media growing. She writes on the media website hearusnow.org, “Across all states and nearly all states of mind, ‘the media’ have replaced ‘politicians’ as one of our most reviled institutions.... The days when Woodward and Bernstein were folk heroes and Walter Cronkite was the most trusted man in America are long gone.”

Significantly, 70% of the people who work in the media tend to feel the same way as their customers. They know how empty-minded many MSM decision-makers are and how much contempt they have for their audience. Journalists know that they routinely practice self-censorship, opting for stories that appeal to the lowest common denominator. In other words, as anger at the media grows, support for the media plummets. Many of our elections are now viewed mostly through the window of manipulative political commercials not held to standards of truthfulness. There are more pundits on the air than journalists. A trend towards sillier and sillier programming results in a lack of respect for media outlets and the shows themselves.

Part of the reason is the blurring of lines between facts and opinion, news

and entertainment: Reality on TV is being replaced by “reality-based” programming. Some of these shows are even promoted as educational when they show people of different races interacting with each other or living together harmoniously, something we rarely see on the news. A study in England praised the Big Brother show for promoting racial tolerance. Reality shows are often seen to be spontaneous and unscripted but are, in fact, as tightly formatted, controlled, and managed as any Hollywood fare by casting agents, script doctors, and show runners. This is why the staffers that make the shows want the same union representation that sitcom employees enjoy.

This genre has its own star system and there are even reality shows about reality shows. For example, cable TV network E! has announced a new program called Kill Reality, which, as the program’s blog puts it, “joins together television’s most infamous cast members from your favorite reality shows and invites them to take a shot at one another—and another 15 minutes of fame— while finally getting their shot at the big time—by starring in an all-new horror film, *The Scorned*.”

It is not surprising that one of the most famous comments about television was Newton Minow’s phrase classification of it as “a vast wasteland,” a land where trivia rules, gossip lives, and we will be right back after the next commercial break. It is also an industry that has proven itself resistant to change, perhaps because of its deeper and darker nature, summed up by the late Hunter S. Thompson: “The TV business is a cruel and shallow money trench, a long plastic hallway where thieves and pimps run free, and good men die like dogs. There’s also a negative side.”

One way to renew a failing system is to bring new players into it. Can new owners get into the American media mix with new programming? In some instances, they have. Mega-web portals like Yahoo and Google are newcomers. Fox News has only been around for ten years, although it’s not exactly the kind of media I would be hoping for, even as it has demonstrated that there are other ways of presenting news and information.

But in all of these cases, it took capital, often from wealthy entrepreneurs with access to the means to compete. Some have been idiosyncratic, like Ted Turner who was never able to translate his “mouth from the

South” affinity for unconventional ideas into programming. Others, like Rupert Murdoch, introduced tabloid techniques long practiced in Britain and his native Australia. And there are still others, like former Vice President Al Gore, who is starting a new cable channel, Current, to give voice to the hopes of younger viewers; and Air America, a fledgling radio network trying to bring progressive voices into a talk radio universe long dominated by the hard right.

More challenging perspectives will largely be frozen out of the market as long as the present constellation of power remains. The leading public interest organization that monitors and lobbies on communications policy, the Consumers Federation of America, studied this problem of market entry, too, concluding: “There has been almost no entry into the business of publishing daily newspapers, the mainstay of print journalism, in decades.

The record shows that the number of papers and owners has been shrinking, not expanding. Entry into the TV business has also not taken place at the level of ownership. Although the number of full power stations has increased, the number of owners has declined sharply.”

Without wider media ownership, variety in programming will continue to shrink. We have yet to come up with a way to create public policies that encourage new entrants into a media business in which production of programs is much easier to create than it is to distribute. This has been done on a small level to encourage more minority owners in broadcasting, but even they have often been funded and controlled by larger media entities.

More diverse ownership, in itself, will not necessarily stimulate the kind of innovation that is needed. New formats and approaches are required.

Revitalizing the news takes fresh blood, yet young people are leaving and developing other news sources. Merrill Brown, a journalist who has run many media outlets, issued a report for the Carnegie Corporation concluding, “the future of the U.S. news industry is seriously threatened by the seemingly irrevocable move by young people away from traditional sources of news”

Participation by younger people in political movements and community-based campaigns testifies to their interest in being more than passive recipients of information. Many want to be more involved and are major consumers and users of new technologies that permit them to do so, such as cell phones, video blogging, podcasts, websites, digital cameras, and even video games. There are also new software technologies, including open source software, that are creating new platforms for more interactive information sharing and expression in the realm of current affairs.

These software applications cost little or nothing and are seen as alternatives to, and in many ways superior to, products made by large software companies like Microsoft. Using them is often thought of as an anti-corporate gesture. They are easily shared and widely accessible. A whole generation of computer savvy “geeks” know how to hack computers and modify applications.

The Indymedia network used this technology to create a global network of websites that permit easy news uploads by users and visitors. This new generation of media activists has also spawned a network of low power radio stations.

COVERING WAR

4. THE MEDIA "COVERS" THE IRAQ WAR

It is safe to predict that the debate over the rationale for and effects of the 2003 war on Iraq will fester for decades to come. Why did the United States act as it did? Did Saddam Hussein's Iraq ever really represent a threat to world security? Was Baghdad seriously violating United Nations restrictions on weapons of mass destruction? Did these weapons still exist when the war began? Did Washington's pre-emptive invasion, at a cost of \$917,744,361.55, according to Pentagon accountants, free Iraq's long-suffering people?

Other questions: what will be the full and final cost in lives, military and civilian, limbs, and destruction of Iraq's infrastructure, economy, and cultural treasures? Did that country's people really welcome the "liberation" promised to them in some 31,800,000 leaflets dropped on their country along with an unknown amount of deadly ordnance? (Newsweek estimated that all of this paper could have been put to more practical use in the form of 120,454 rolls of toilet paper.)

The war had its official statisticians just as sporting events do. They counted everything; including the 423,988 members of U.S. military units deployed, as opposed to the less than 10 percent of that number in other forces, just 42,987 "foreign" troops rustled up into what was clumsily labeled a "coalition of the willing."

What was unaccounted for, at least by the invaders, and rarely shown in western media, were the civilian casualties. As a matter of policy, the United States refused to release any figures or even estimates. The United Nations was tracking the problem. At the end of May, their agencies were guesstimating that the toll may surpass ten thousand, a stunningly large number, considering all of the assurances given that every effort would be made to limit damage to the society and its long-suffering civilian population.

According to Ian Bruce in the Glasgow Herald: "The toll will exceed the 3500 civilians killed in the 1991 Gulf war and the 1800 to 2000 innocent Afghans known to have perished during the 2001 invasion to oust the Taliban and wipe out al Qaeda's training camps." Haidar Taie, who runs the Red Crescent's tracing department in Baghdad, said: "We just don't know

for certain. But thousands are dead, thousands more injured or missing. It will take time to reach a definitive count. It was certainly a disaster for civilians caught in the fighting.”

“The War for Iraqi Freedom,” as the Pentagon and at least two networks branded it, went on for 720 hours. It was well documented by the Pentagon, which transmitted 3,200 hours of video and took 42,000 pictures, most of which the public did not, and may never, view.

What we did see, and read about the Iraq War is the subject of this book fashioned in the heat of the conflict. If journalism is a matter of course considered the first draft of history, this is one of the first book-length attempts to focus on the coverage and its many flaws, written before our memories fade.

These media versions of the Iraq war that were transmitted on television and in the press, the versions that shaped impressions and public opinion.

This book is about more visible WMD’s than the ones discussed in the media. It is about the media itself viewed as a weapon system: Weapons of Mass Deception. Those weapons drove a media war, a war that many now believe perverted freedom of the press in the name of serving it. Many used patriotism as a promotional tool, pandering to fears and nationalist sentiment.

There was warfare within the media, too, as media companies battled each other for scoops, exclusives, branding and positioning. They fought for market share, “mindshare” and ad-spend share. Within the trenches of the industry, and sometimes within the companies themselves, journalists and program producers wrestled with their colleagues and counter- parts for guests and a competitive advantage. They worked with the military discipline of soldiers, only they were paid for their overtime. (When I worked at ABC, staffers were called “the troops.”)

Yet, even as they competed against their counterparts, they also collaborated with each other, often drawing on the same footage, carrying the same stories, echoing the same administration claims and following the Pentagon’s lead. Often they cloned each other’s looks, formulas, and formatting and “enhancement” techniques. They often looked and sounded more alike than they thought. Their sameness trumped their differences.

The war brought out some of the best in journalism and too much of the worst. It showed the news business' vast technological capacity to bring us live coverage from the battlefield, but also demonstrated its power to sanitize that coverage and spin it propagandistically. It shamelessly recycled stories, repeating key themes, updating updates, all while promoting its own coverage.

This media war promoted the war it covered. It mobilized approval among opinion-making elites in Washington, London and other world capitals. First, it constructed the political environment, contributing to the sense of inevitability about the need for war and then fostered approval for it. Critical voices quickly vanished as fighting got underway.

The media war targeted the larger public, too, and in the United States at least, built what was reported as a consensus for the war and a national acceptance of its official goals and effects. The war coverage sold the war even as it claimed to be just reporting it. Media outlets called attention to their news gathering techniques, but never to their effects.

During the first Gulf War, communications scholars found that people who relied exclusively on television for their news and information tended to know the least about the issues. I am sure similar studies will produce similar findings about this war. Most Americans lacked much knowledge about the issue before the war. Only 13 percent of America's teenagers could even find Iraq on a map. So much for the educational job done by the media and our schools.

The war and its coverage also turned off and tuned out tens of millions who took to the streets, rejecting the pro-war media frame, in the largest global protests in history. Relying on independent media, international newspapers and feisty web sites for their information, they criticized both the policy and the press. In the aftermath of the giant February 15, 2003 protests, The New York Times commented that there were then two opposing global superpowers: the military might of the United States and world public opinion. As the war erupted, the critics were "disappeared" from the media view just as Saddam disposed of his critics. He used violence; our media used inattention.

Even as those protests were often badly and in some cases barely covered, they nevertheless spoke for millions who rejected the media war aimed at

their minds and spirits. One can only hope that as the claims and “evidence” used to stoke up the war are unmasked, the media role will also be seen for what it is.

As Paul Krugman commented on the Times op-ed page, “over the last two years we’ve become accustomed to the pattern. Each time the administration comes up with another whopper, partisan supporters (a group that includes a large segment of the news media) obediently insist that black is white and up is down.

“Meanwhile, the “liberal” media report only that some people say that black is black and up is up. And some democratic politicians offer the administration invaluable cover by making excuses and playing down the extent of their lies.”

Most of us were not on the battlefield. Our understanding of what happened, our perceptions, points of view and prejudices were forged and framed by our media choices. We need to see that as a problem that demands to be addressed. Just as we consider politicians lying to us a problem, media accountability and responsibility are as important as political responsibility.

5. A CALL FOR A MEDIA CRIMES TRIBUNAL

TESTIMONY OF DANNY SCHECHTER TO THE WORLD TRIBUNAL ON IRAQ

Assessing Media Wrongs

It is complicated and problematic for a journalist to offer testimony at an international tribunal in another country. Most of us tend to stay away from the appearance of advocacy or even activism. Testifying overseas—even to a citizen’s panel like this—could be construed by some as presumptuous or even unpatriotic.

Yet I have come because I believe that our media, like other institutions, have a responsibility to be accountable, audit their own practices, and acknowledge their errors and omissions.

We are living in an age of a profound global media crisis that goes beyond borders and boundaries.

Journalists who are closest to our media system—really embedded in it—are often in the best position to understand media practices and recount experiences. We know how the industry works and are most aware of the pressures journalists face from government interference and corporate control.

It is time we woke up and spoke up. It is time we told the truth about our own institutions. We need higher standards and deeper values. I have been in journalism since my high school years. I have been an investigative magazine reporter, a radio news director, and worked in television at the local and national levels with a long stint at ABC News and a shorter one at CNN. I have reported from 49 countries.

I am a media critic with six books in print and a columnist/blogger with MediaChannel.org, the world’s largest online media issues network. As an independent filmmaker with my company Globalvision, I have made fifteen social issue documentaries. The latest, WMD (Weapons of Mass Deception) is about the media coverage of the Iraq War and is based in part on a book called *Embedded* that I wrote on the subject.

I have come wearing all of these hats to discuss my findings in the belief that if we could agree on the existence of media crimes, we would agree that many have been committed during the Iraq War. Some of them through insensitivity and indifference, others with more conscious intent.

This is not a partisan issue. It raises deeper issues about the integrity of our democracies.

In point of fact, in earlier wars, media outlets and personalities have been indicted for their role in instigating conflict and contributing to it. The special International Tribunal on Rwanda has pointed to the role of hate radio stations in inflaming genocide. In the former Yugoslavia, TV stations in Serbia and Croatia became propaganda organs that incited ethnic cleansing and mass murder.

The post-World War II Nuremberg Trial established a precedent in this regard. I quote one article on what happened there:

The prosecution case, argued by Drexel Sprecher, an American, placed considerable stress on the role of media propaganda in enabling the Hitler regime to prepare and carry out aggressive wars.

The use made by the Nazi conspirators of psychological warfare is well known. Before each major aggression, with some few exceptions based on expediency, they initiated a press campaign calculated to weaken their victims and to prepare the German people psychologically for the attack. They used the press, after their earlier conquests, as a means for further influencing foreign politics and in maneuvering for the following aggression.

Thus, the presentation of an illegal invasion of a foreign country as a 'preventative' or preemptive war did not originate with Bush, Cheney or Rusted. The prosecution raised an issue that is of the greatest relevance today: the role of Nazi media propaganda in inuring the German population to the sufferings of other peoples and, indeed, urging Germans to commit war crimes.

Historical parallels are never exact and I am not here to argue that because the Nazis distorted their media, the U.S. or British media are Nazis. That is specious reasoning. But a broader point also argued at Nuremberg does

have resonance today:

The basic method of the Nazi propagandistic activity lay in the false presentation of facts. ... The dissemination of provocative lies and the systematic deception of public opinion were as necessary to the Hitlerites for the realization of their plans, as were the production of armaments and the drafting of military plans.

There Was a Media War

There were two wars going on in Iraq—one was fought with armies of soldiers, bombs and a fearsome military force. The other was fought alongside it with cameras, satellites, armies of journalists and propaganda techniques. One war was rationalized as an effort to find and disarm WMD's—Weapons of Mass Destruction; the other was carried out by even more powerful WMD's, Weapons of Mass Deception.

The TV networks in America considered their nonstop coverage their finest hour, pointing to the use of embedded journalists and new technologies that permitted viewers to see a war up close for the first time. But different countries saw different wars.

Why?

For those of us watching the coverage, the war was more of a spectacle, an around-the-clock global media marathon, pitting media outlets against each other in ways that distorted truth and raised as many questions about the methods of TV news as the armed intervention it was covering—and in some cases—promoting.

This is not just traditional censorship.

Censorship, self-censorship and spinning seem common in every war, as governments try to limit negative coverage and maximize reporting that will galvanize support on the home front. Every war inspires jingoism in sections of the media, and deceptive coverage.

Sun Tsu, the great Chinese analyst of war, said that deception is a tool in every war, by definition. Wars happen because of deception. They are fought with deception. But what was often discussed in the past as a tactic

or a tool has become a well-deployed strategy with sophisticated high-tech information warfare doctrines guiding attempts to achieve strategic influence based on policies built on deception. This concept is deeply grounded in neo-conservative ideologies based on the work of the late University of Chicago philosopher Leo Strauss.

It is not accidental. It is deliberate.

Many in the Pentagon believe to this day that it was the media coverage that was responsible for the loss of the Vietnam War. We saw a media war within that war, too, as former Washington Post reporter William Prochna remembers before Vietnam:

We had already endured a century full of wars. Heavily censored wars. So total was the government manipulation of public opinion in World War I that the chief U.S. propagandist charged with getting us into the fray later described his efforts as “the world’s greatest adventure in advertising.” Censorship was so uniformly accepted in World War II that Life magazine did not run a photograph of a dead American until 1943, and the director of the Office of Censorship was given a special Pulitzer Prize citation. The Cold War, with its threat of nuclear extinction, brought self-censorship to a new level.

In Vietnam, at first, Kennedy actually believed he could fight it as the communists fought theirs—in secret. How could you censor a war you weren’t fighting? So Vietnam began uncensored and stayed uncensored. But Kennedy could not keep the war small and surely not secret.

Inevitably, Kennedy ran head-on into the beginning of the so-called generation gap that would haunt the ‘60s, and (or did Vietnam start both?) a massive sea change in American journalism. Wars are fought by the young. They are also reported by the young. And the young Vietnam reporters of the early ‘60s were neither constrained by censorship nor total-war certainties.

Shockingly, they began to report that the emperor wore no clothes. Americans were dying. The government was lying. Perhaps the unkindest of cuts, the United States was losing despite the rosy optimism of inflated body counts and politicized “victories” in non-battles fought by its South Vietnamese clients.

Some of the early correspondents—David Halberstam of the New York

Times; Neil Sheehan of UPI; Malcolm Browne, Peter Arnett, and Hans Faas of AP—became legends and worked their way into history as surely as the policymakers. Sheehan, standing in an airport knot of reporters, once welcomed Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara to Saigon with a loud, mocking stage whisper, “Ah, another foolish Westerner come to lose reputation to Ho Chi Minh.”

The sea change was not without its bruise: reporters were attacked as too young and inexperienced by Kennedy’s government and chased down as communist sympathizers by the South Vietnamese secret police. They also were assaulted, their patriotism questioned by the old guard in the press corps, veterans of the “last good war” against the Germans and Japanese.

With Vietnam over, the study groups, seminars, and lectures at the War College began the preparation for handling the media in the inevitable wars to come. If censorship couldn’t be the rule, outflanking would—time has not narrowed the gulf.

Post-Vietnam Media Management

So what we have had are large amounts of money and manpower invested in controlling the media. At the same time, with mounting media consolidation, with the corporatization of the news biz and its integration into show biz, there was a sea change inside the media business. This is the context that is often missed with all the Bush bashing. One man did not organize this war. It took powerful institutions: a military industrial MEDIA complex.

We have to put it in the context not just of U.S. foreign policy but in the way our modern media system works. Viewers in Italy have watched how your TV system—from RAI to private channels—has been Berlusconiized. You know what I am talking about. Here you have an unholy alliance of media and government power. In the U.S., corporate media has become a handmaiden of special interests.

News managers who were not journalists took over and bottom-line pressures begat infotainment and more and more celebrity coverage. Pundits soon outnumbered journalists. Journalism schools started producing more PR experts than reporters.

The government took PR to a new level: It is called “perception management”

and it treats war as a product to be “rolled out” and promoted. It is serious and systematic.

Twenty-four-hour cable news channels offered more news, not better news. They soon degenerated into a headline hit parade. Investigative reporting had long since given way to “breaking news” free of context and background. In- depth documentaries disappeared from the prime time environment. Reality- based programming replaced reports anchored in reality.

Anchors complained that the media had gone from being a watchdog to a lap dog, but did nothing about it.

It was this transformation of the media system—implemented over twenty years with an assist by deregulation of public interest laws—that made the media a willing accomplice—especially in the post-9/11 environment of fear and patriotic correctness. When news anchors started emulating politicians by wearing American flags in their lapels, it became clear that the news media was being integrated into what amounted to a state-run media system.

Soon there were embedded reporters narrowly focusing their reports on the ground campaign while the air attacks, use of prohibited weapons, special covert operations teams and civilian casualties went uncovered. It was deliberate but occasioned little comment with news networks seeking Pentagon approval for their on-camera experts and former generals to offer sports-like play-by-play assessments. Reporters in the field began to identify with the soldiers, often saying “WE” when they began their reports, as if their news organizations were part of the war—as they were.

Hollywood story-telling techniques replaced fact-based journalism with a master narrative and “message points” influencing media coverage. Hollywood producers and graphic artists were recruited to give war coverage high production values. It was like a movie shoot. Time magazine called it “militainment.”

The U.S. military commander Tommy Franks created a “Secret Plan” which was quietly leaked to friendly journalists like those at Fox News. He spoke of the media as “the fourth front” of the war, not a separate and autonomous fourth estate. No wonder CNN’s Christianne Amanpour would later admit: “It looks like this was disinformation at the highest levels.”

It didn't just look that way. It was that way.

She charged that her own network was “muzzled” and blamed not just the government, but also the foot soldiers at Rupert Murdoch’s Fox News Network. In a hyper-competitive environment, no journalists or networks want to be accused of backing terrorists. When the President says repeatedly, you are “either with us or the terrorists” a clear signal is sent. Media companies that need favors, access to power and regulatory rule changes are unlikely to become a critical platform. It is not in their interest. In this environment, you get along by going along. That’s what most did.

One result: out of 800 experts on all the U.S. channels from the run-up to the war until April 9, 2003, when the statues were brought down by the U.S. military and a carefully assembled crowd of U.S. supporters, only six opposed the war.

Only six!

The media environment was soon charged with a mix of seductive co-optation that gave selected journalists access to the front lines and military protection and intimation, attacks on critical reporting, denunciations of journalists who stepped out of line and even, some charge, the deliberate targeting and killing of journalists in incidents such as the one at the Palestine Hotel.

My film, WMD: Weapons of Mass Deception, reports on these incidents and quotes the distinguished historian of the media and war, Phillip Knightly, as saying that he now believes that the firing on media sites was deliberate. CNN’s Eason Jordan told a panel at the World Economic Forum in January 2005, that journalists were targeted. When challenged, he seems to have backed away from his initial claim that 12 journalists had been killed by the U.S. military. There has yet to be an independent investigation.

Please understand, this does not add up to a critique of a few lapses or media mistakes. The Iraq War was not a catalogue of errors or flaws. It was planned and formatted, pre-produced and aired with high production values, and designed to persuade, not just inform.

Yes, some news organizations including the Washington Post and New York Times did limited media culpas and admitted they were not critical enough,

especially on the WMD issue which turned out to be total hoax despite repeated assurances over months that they were there, had to be there, would be found, etc., etc. Once this fraud was unmasked, the administration and the media shifted message points and asserted that the WMD's that were painted as threat to the world were no longer terribly important. They were counting on the public's short attention span.

More recently, we saw that the Iraqi election in which voters came out to demand an end to occupation spun as vindication of the Administration's war policy. The focus was on their bravery, not their motivation. President Bush was clearly the winner with a rise in public opinion approval.

The template and routines of pro-war coverage continue even as the public turns against the war. Critics still have to fight for airtime while Administration officials and pro-war Democrats are constantly on the air.

What does all this mean? It means we live in a mediaocracy, not a democracy. Our media, which enjoys constitutional protections to act as a guardian of democracy, is actively undermining it. Media intimidation made it impossible for our opposition party to even make the war an issue. John Kerry was viciously demonized for his opposition to the Vietnam War and his service record was distorted—for weeks. This pattern has not changed.

That is why this issue is so relevant and timely.

What we are seeing is a crime against democracy and the public's right to know.

It is a crime against the people of Iraq who have suffered and died in large numbers in this war even though the extent of it is not reported. We have had coverage of torture incidents but no real investigation of the responsibility of decision-makers.

Only a handful of journalists follow that story closely, including Seymour Hersh who exposed the My-Lai massacre in Vietnam. He publishes in a smaller magazine, not a big newspaper.

This is a crime against our soldiers whose grueling experience goes largely unreported, as do their casualties and psychological traumas.

It is a crime against the profession of journalism that has been shamelessly distorted even as many conscientious reporters soldier on, often in an alternative media that reaches a smaller audience.

Crimes demand exposure and punishment.

That's why I have come all this way to Rome, to add the voice of an American journalist to the call for consequences for these crimes and more debate about them in the anti-war movement. This kind of media complicity has to be challenged, refuted, condemned, and opposed. This World Tribunal is doing it. That's why I am here.

Will this Tribunal be covered—or covered up?

The fight for a free and independent media is a global fight. We need to show solidarity with each other. Journalists in other countries need to appreciate the fact that many Americans are speaking out and to understand the pressures we are under.

We need to dialogue with each other and support media freedom. I have come to stand up and to be counted, to offer myself. That's all I can do. Grazie.

Feb. 8, 2005

6. AMERICA'S SHINING MEDIAOCRACY

One minute it was news. All the News All the Time. The biggest news on the planet. Bold headlines. Non-stop TV cycles of 24/7 “Breaking News.” Breathless broadcasts.

And then, as if someone clicked a remote control, reports about the struggle for power were gone. The story vanished from our TV screens and newspapers. Despite so many unanswered questions, so many allegations of gross irregularities and alleged violations of federal laws guaranteeing the right to vote, the political battle was pronounced “over.”

The election of 2000 was decided not by the people but by the courts. Without a blink, the mainstream American media promoted George W. Bush's ascendancy to the Presidency with the finality of a sports victory. (That may be because TV reporters covered it as they would an athletic contest, constantly referring to the candidates as the “Bush Team” and the “Gore Team.”)

Once politicians proclaimed “closure,” a media echo chamber moved into the Amen corner. In the flash of a quick cut MTV-like edit, the closest and most controversial political contest in U.S. history became yesterday's story—an event left for historians to wrangle over, and conspiracy theorists to debate. The mainstream media had signed off with a speedy sayonara, urging the rest of us to get in line, accept, and follow the new leader.

“Nary a Public Peep”

Writing in Gully, an online magazine, Ana Simo complained that so few others were seemingly NOT as shocked as she was, stating: “The dirtiest U.S. election in more than a century—and one of the dirtiest elections anywhere in the world in recent times—elicited nary a public peep from the American people. Whatever they felt, Americans largely kept it to themselves. The nation's deafening silence as democracy was trampled is the saddest outcome of this election.”

What was responsible for this “deafening silence”? Simo ticks off a few factors including the deep respect Americans have for the courts, for the rule of law. She also cites a desire for stability after the uncertainties of a

legal battle that yin-yanged back and forth for more than a month. Noting the obvious and pervasive public indifference to both candidates, she nonetheless focuses on the key problem: the central role played by the press in the political outcome, indicting “the quick onslaught of conformist, self-congratulatory propaganda spewed out by the media and by both political parties of the ‘time-to-rally-round-the-flag-and-be-good-sports’ kind. Within seconds of George W. Bush’s judicial installation, network anchors were hectoring people to accept the outcome, however abhorrent—a shockingly inappropriate, politicized, and unsolicited piece of advice.”

The search for a deeper understanding of why the U.S. election campaign of 2000 turned into such a debacle for democracy has just begun. It has, until now, mostly focused on what did and did not happen in the voting booths of Florida, or “Fraudia” as some critics came to call a State whose apparatus was controlled by Republicans led by the new President’s own brother Jeb Bush. This debate has for the most part turned on voting discrepancies, state voting statutes and county-by-county practices, disputed legalities and narrowly politicized wrangles about what a recount of the ballots would or would not show.

Undeniably, those issues are real. But there’s more to it, much more. Eight years ago, Bill Clinton’s campaign organized itself around a theme defined by the well-known slogan “It’s the Economy, Stupid.” In 2001, as we look back at one of the most suspect democratic elections of our time, I’d modify that slogan to suggest, “It was the media stupid.”

The Scandal Missing from the Media Was the Media

The counting and undercounting of the election ballots, the mistaken votes and bizarre “overvotes” was a scandal seen around the world. Rarely seen and poorly covered in the media was another scandal within that scandal—the role played by the media itself. In this book, we argue that one can only understand what happened in the election of 2000 by understanding the role, function and performance of the media, which covered the election by miscovering it.

“We are the only democracy that organizes its national campaign around the news media,” Political scientist Tomas E Patterson concluded after studying US election coverage from 1960-1992. “News coverage has too often become a barrier between the candidate and the voter rather than a

bridge connecting them.” After almost every election, there are studies like his showing the substantial impact that news coverage had on voter attitudes and decisions. But no sooner are such studies published than their lessons are forgotten.

What has been true for many years was especially true in the year 2000, which may have established a new low for the media demeaning democracy. “Presidential campaigns are America’s “political Olympics,” says journalist Liz Cunningham who has written about how we choose candidates in the television age. “So the basic issues surrounding media coverage—distortion, bias, manipulation, character are in sharp focus.” In many ways, TV News has established its bonafides through its coverage of politics. As this book shows in sickening detail, that credibility is shot, or should be. The love affair between the journalists and the politicians, in former NBC correspondent Linda Ellerbee’s words “gives unsafe sex a good name”

That scandal was not a crude conspiracy nor is it simply an accidental occurrence. Its roots can be found in a corporate media environment that has been changing for years, as well as in the increasing corporatization of politics itself. It reflects a growing symbiotic relationship between increasingly interlocking media and political elites. Together, they form a powerful, interdependent system in which overt ideology and shared worldviews mask more covert subservience to other agendas. Together these two forces form a Mediaocracy, a political system tethered to a media system.

On one level, this Mediaocracy was there for all to see, day in and day out, month after month, visible on hundreds of TV channels and media outlets all competing for our ears, eyeballs and attention. But on another level, despite the ubiquitous chatter, polls and punditry, it resembled the tip of a shadowy iceberg with its far more insidious bulk hidden well below the surface. In that respect, the media role in our electoral process has, in words used by media guru Marshall McLuhan, become “a hidden environment, pervasively invisible.”

An Accessory to the Crime

If the election of 2000 was stolen as many believe, the media is, at the very least, an accessory to the crime, a crime that represents a more ominous

threat to democracy itself, a crime that is not limited to one election in one year. This was and remains a full-blown crisis in confidence, not a mere ho-hum “irregularity” or “anomaly.” In legal terms, we are talking felony, not misdemeanor.

That larger crime is the subject of this book, assembled in the immediate aftermath of the outcome of the 2000 election, compiled while its many assaults against the values of a democratic culture are still fresh in mind but still not fully assessed. The editors and contributors of the MediaChannel.org are releasing it before the inexorable forces of a media-induced amnesia erase our collective memory of recent events in the rush, ostensibly, to “heal” and move us back to business and a politics of passivity-as-usual.

This book is not the work of media bashers or conspiracy nuts. It reflects the thinking of independent journalists and analysts, media makers and practitioners. Some of us are insiders, well aware of how the media system works and often doesn’t work. Some of us are critics with an outsider outlook. None of us are hostile to the media per se, although we do tie its apparent decline to the growing severity of the larger crisis in what we grew up believing was a culture committed to democracy.

Mea Culpa

At the outset, we must acknowledge that there was a great deal of fine journalism produced throughout the campaign and election period. We respect the work and the seriousness of many of our colleagues, who as individuals, strove to get the news out and get it right. Yet few journalists operate outside institutional settings, separate and apart from the larger world of the Mediaocracy and its competitive pressures and homogenized think-alike, look-alike templates and modes of presentation.

What many of us in the media world sometimes forget is that the sum of our work is often greater than its parts; our collective media work product often has unintended political impacts and sometimes pursue agendas which become clearer upon close examination. Often lone reporters in the trenches cannot alter or challenge the direction taken by their own news organizations. They don’t assign themselves to stories for the most part and write for editors and news outlets that exercise tight controls over the tone and range of editorial content. The way journalists cover elections often reflects decisions about the allocation of resources and programming

priorities made by non-journalists at the top.

Former NBC executive turned investment banker Tom Wolzien, for example, blames budget cuts for the errors made on election night. “The election night problem for the networks shows the risks to the long term corporate position when the wrong cuts are made to enhance short term earnings,” he writes in Brill’s Content, a corporate media magazine. But as the articles in this collection show, bottom line pressures have a far deeper impact. They have definitely skewed the mission that many journalists feel as World Paper editor Crocker Snow points out in his preface, discussing a media that has become far too “polished and professionalized.”

We apologize up front if our critical brush is too broad in places or our distinctions not fine enough. Obviously, a term like ‘the media’ is imprecise and inherently unfair since it falsely suggests to some that the U.S. media is monolithic and that individual enterprise is not important. We know that is not true and hope that readers will find persuasive specificity and well-documented arguments in the diverse content we here offer in the spirit of professional self-scrutiny and debate. As Liz Cunningham noted years ago, “the media environment isn’t just television or print for that matter, it’s also a reflection of our civic culture, our sense of ourselves as a nation.”

A MediaChannel Collection

Hail to the Thief is a collection of reports, articles, analysis, studies, essays, columns and tracking data that did not for the most part find its way into mainstream media discourse or political debate, at least not in time to have much effect or alter an approach that time and again, tilted towards the status quo. In a campaign that The Wall Street Journal compared to Coke and Pepsi’s battle for market share, the coverage reflected the corporate worldview of the two dominant candidates and the marketing campaigns they ran. (After he settled in to the White House, George W Bush reorganized its operations along corporate lines “to function with the crisp efficiency of a blue chip corporation,” according to a front page story in the New York Times, (“Bush is Providing Corporate Model for White House, Sunday March 11, 2001.”)

The big media companies that covered them are no less corporate in their organization and aims, and most often just as ideologically homogenous in their approach, tending, as our data shows, to cover the same story the same way.

Just as the candidates had agendas, so did the media. The former wanted votes, the latter craved audience but also served an ideological role. The objectives of the politicians were the subject of considerable coverage; the role of the media rated much less.

Most of these articles are drawn from the Internet, a medium that did not exist as an influential force in earlier elections. Most appeared on the MediaChannel.org, a not-for-profit web site that was set up by concerned journalists to monitor and debate the role of the media. Some were written for MediaChannel.org directly and others by some of the 656 plus affiliates who together form the largest online media issues network in the world. Throughout the campaign and the election, these outlets provided compelling but alarming coverage that showed how many media outlets had been co-opted by the political parties, skewing reportage, biasing coverage in favor of one or another candidate and refusing to cover independent candidates or feature critical perspectives. Our analysts often reported a pro-George Bush bias, although we also covered media outlets that seemed to favor Al Gore and many that had no time or space for Ralph Nader.

Hail to the Thief also taps the unique contributions of two leading MediaChannel.org affiliates: Media Tenor and The World Paper. Media Tenor, based in Germany, is a professional monitoring organization that works primarily for commercial clients. At our request, they tracked and analyzed media coverage of the campaign each week. Many of their findings based on sentence-by-sentence analysis can be found here.

The World Paper, through its global network of affiliated newspapers, has a finger on the pulse of a type of “inside-out” world opinion and reporting that rarely infiltrates American media. Their editors have assembled editorial insights from journalists around the world because what happens in the US election invariably affects all peoples and nations. Their editor, veteran journalist Crocker Snow, has written the preface to Hail to the Thief.

A Media Dissent

This coverage of the media coverage tells a story that the media itself does not. It is the story of how Big Media got into bed with Big Politics, of how it consistently under-informed the voting public and turned off large segments of the electorate, discouraging younger voters. By monitoring media choices, framing and filtering, by critiquing programming, pressures

and news routines, MediaChannel.org affiliates reveal a clear pattern of how news organizations undermined a fair election and in the process assisted in the theft of an election from the people themselves. Their approach, in the view of many of the writers in these pages, devalues democracy.

So, if something was “stolen” in the 2000 Election , it was the very idea of a fair and democratic electoral process, “robbed” from the American people—not just one political office, even if was the Presidency.

“If democracy is genuinely committed to letting citizens have equal influence over political affairs, it is crucial that all citizens have access to well-formulated political positions on the key issues of the day, as well as a rigorous accounting of the activities of the political and economic powers that be and the powers that want to be,” asserts media historian Robert W. McChesney in *Rich Media/Poor Democracy*. It was the absence of such regularly supplied information that led McChesney and others to call the media today a “significant anti-democratic force” in American life.

Together, the contributions to this book represent a media dissent, no less important than the electrifying judicial dissent filed by Supreme Court Associate Judge John Paul Stevens in the case of “*Bush v Gore*.” With a few well-chosen words, Stevens declared that while we may never know who won the election, the loser is clear: the integrity of the judges, and by extension, the public’s faith in an unbiased judicial system.

The reputation of the Supreme Court was tarnished in this election, as were the parties and the candidates. But so was the performance of the media. According to survey researcher Andrew Kohut writing in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, when the public was asked to grade the media’s contribution in 2000, just 28 percent gave grades of A or B for election coverage. Almost four out of ten respondents (38 percent) offered up a failing grade, a D or an F. Significantly, this same public disdain for the media was registered after prior elections. Clearly, media chiefs did not choose to hear what the public thought and did little to respond to earlier calls for internal reforms. So much for the media system “giving the public what it wants.”

For us, the journalists and editors who set up MediaChannel.org, what is at stake are the credibility, integrity and role of the media itself, and by extension the public’s faith in their elected officials and their democracy.

Indicting the Media

Think of this book as one basis for an indictment that is, in these times and in our media-dominated culture well beyond adjudication. No black-robed judges will hear it because surely it would be dismissed on a prima facie basis as a violation of the First Amendment, which has been interpreted to give media companies free reign without restraint or guiding sense of public service. Although we know full well that in a legalistic sense we may lack standing to bring such charges, we are standing up and speaking out anyway in the hope that the proverbial “court of public opinion” will find much to agree with and much to learn within these pages. We are not advocating censorship or interference in editorial decisions. We are suggesting that the media has an affirmative responsibility to serve the public interest and promote a democratic culture.

Hail to the Thief shows how the media helped pollute the environment in which Election 2000 took place. To adequately contextualize media complicity, one needs to track institutional changes over time in both industries: politics and the media. These articles offer some of this crucial background but also deal directly with the specific ways media had an impact on the election, shaping public opinion and downplaying important issues.

Among the “counts” of this indictment are the following claims, for each of which the studies cited in these pages offer compelling evidence:

1. The media provided less election coverage than in years past. According to Steven Hess of the centrist Brookings Institution, through Election Day network news provided “the fewest minutes of campaign news in their history... 2000 is 53% below 1992, and 12% below four years ago, for a new low.”
2. The media focused on personalities more than on issues, offering few in-depth investigative features. This has been true for many years, but in 2000 one of the top election coverage monitors concluded it was “radically different.” What was stressed, again according to Hess’s well-funded research, was that “‘strategy over substance’ more than ever defines TV news. The profile of network news this year was radically different from past years.

Typically, September is the month that journalists tell us about the candidates, who they are, their records in office, and their proposals in detail. Then, as we cross the line into October, the coverage changes to who's ahead and who's behind. But 2000 has been horse race reporting since Labor Day."

3. The media barely and badly covered independent candidates like Ralph Nader. His conclusion as stated in his own media post mortem in Brill's Content, "No democracy worth its salt should rely so pervasively on the commercial media. And no seriously pro-democracy campaign will ever get an even break, or adequate coverage, from that media."
4. The TV networks deliberately shifted their coverage internally and externally. News managers shifted much of it from heavily watched prime time slots to less-viewed morning shows. Reports Hess: "While the eight week total of campaign coverage on the evening news was about nine and a half hours, Good Morning America on ABC, The Early Show broadcast more than 19 hours of campaign news. Still, isn't it powerfully odd to move our major public affairs programming from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m., when most of us are rushing off to work or getting kids ready for school?"
5. And if that wasn't bad enough, most of their coverage was displaced further from broadcast networks to cable channels with far smaller audiences, reducing coverage of primaries and conventions. What convention coverage there was treated the conventions like serious political events, when they were actually show biz-styled political infomercials produced for TV consumption. The sole exception to these trends was provided by C-SPAN, the non-commercial cable outlet that offered up unedited coverage of political events but only, alas, for a relatively small audience. To Ralph Nader, the C-SPAN approach "speaks volumes about the vacuum that surrounds it."
6. The media coverage was on balance hostile to Al Gore and slanted towards George W. Bush, although a pro-corporate bias may have been more entrenched than any partisan outlook. Nevertheless, our week-by-week

analysis documented a pattern in which the Democrat Gore was put on the defensive, ridiculed for his policy flip-flops and personal style while the Republican George W. Bush was treated far more deferentially.

7. There was more “opinionizing” overall than reporting in the press, more punditry on polls and focus on the horse race than on political policy differences. There was more time devoted to assessing the campaigns than to exploring the issues and interests they advocated. “What the public heard,” Russ Baker concludes in the Columbia Journalism Review’s post-election wrap up, “was what the candidates chose to talk about.” Independent views and investigative reporting were conspicuous by their absence.
8. The media did little to encourage young people and minorities to vote. Overall politics was represented as “boring,” concerning issues that only experts, senior journalists and other politicians cared about. Most of the people who discussed these issues on the political talk shows were older “white men in suits”—hardly representative of the voting-age population.
9. Entertainment values infiltrated electoral coverage. Time Magazine called it “Electotainment.” What was pervasive in 2000 were entertainers commenting on politics. “There’s nothing new about comedians’ milking the news,” quipped Eric Efron in Brill’s. “What’s new is the extent to which the news has been milking the comedians.” Many media outlets carried more political ads than reports, more comedy about politics than in-depth reporting.
10. The media focused on polls without adequately explaining their limits, or how polls in turn are affected by the slant of media coverage.
11. A commission run by the candidates dictated the framework of the debates. They excluded other candidates and avoided important issues. They were only covered by a few networks and enjoyed the lowest audience share in history. Their moderator Jim Lehrer of PBS is, to put it charitably, hardly a dynamic figure well known to younger or minority voters. His news program is one of

- the lowest rated on television.
12. On Election night, the media released results before all the polls closed, made false projections and, as a result damaged the electoral process.
 13. The media carried virtually no stories anticipating massive election fraud and vote-counting irregularities before they occurred, and then treated the effort to insure a fair count once fraud and irregularities were disclosed in a cynical, impatient and hostile manner, constantly reporting falsely that the public wanted closure when polls indicated widespread support for a full and fair count.
 14. While the legal debate was covered, relatively little attention was paid to the political character of the judiciary that decided the outcome.

Taken together, these factors and others show that the media's decision to ignore important political issues had a significant impact on the election outcome. Moreover, a careful analysis of this recent interaction between the media and politics reveals an inescapable paradox: the U.S. news industry's amazing capacity to gather and disseminate information about our political process has been met by the media's apparent lack of interest in doing so.

The Merger of Media and Politics

Our central finding: the media no longer, if it ever did, stands apart from politics as a neutral—much less objective—watchdog operating outside the political system to strengthen democracy. In an age of corporate mergers and unprecedented media concentration, the media have, in effect, merged with politics, and now function as a key component of a system that Norman Mailer sees, with a whiff of the Mafia Theory of Organization, as a “family.”

“The American political body had evolved,” he writes in an essay in his 1998 anthology *The Time of Our Time*, “into a highly controlled and powerfully manipulated democracy overseen by a new species of aristocracy formed at the junction of four Royal Families—the ten thousand dollar suits of the mega-corporations, the titans of the media, the high ogres of Congress and the upper lords of the White House.”

Our focus is on one of those “families,” the titans of the media, and the nonstop clatter of the cable news channels, and news/talk radio, of constantly updated news cycles and scientifically calibrated spin machines, of talk shows in the morning and comedians late at night, of newspapers scrambling to keep up with reports on their own constantly updated web sites. There are hundreds of outlets competing for our attention in what media columnist Michael Wolff of *New York Magazine* calls an “information swamp.” “Nobody can be trusted,” he writes. “Nobody is able to offer credible interpretations of motives (partly because their own are so suspect.) . . . As in the Clinton impeachment, every single blowhard who has gotten on the air has been wrong about basically everything.”

It seems as if after every presidential election, there are postmortems like this making the same points. And many sound obscenely similar. Sadly, the media seems to learn little from them.

After the 1972 campaign, critics noted that candidate George McGovern’s attempts to focus on corruption in the Nixon White House were mostly ignored by the national media. He was called “shrill” and “strident.” His charges only became public after Richard Nixon’s election to a second term and later led to his resignation thanks to the Watergate scandal. (It was police reporters, not White House correspondents who first blew the whistle on that crisis!)

In 1984, Reagan’s campaign successfully cultivated the media to project his image as the “Great Communicator,” as someone who had great rapport with the American people. Subsequent analysis by media critics Elliot Kind and Michael Schudson showed that this was in fact completely contrived. “We believe,” the authors concluded, “that Reagan’s more effective skill was in communication with key elites, including the media itself.” The idea that he was great communicator was a political concoction, which quickly became a media mantra.

The focus that year was on the campaign, not the worthiness of the candidate. In 1987, Historian James David Barber wrote in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, “By focusing on the campaign—that temporary amorphous, shifting, artificial clutch of events—commentators unplugged the essential predictions about Reagan from the requirements of the presidency on the one hand and from Reagan’s record on the other.”

Three years later, in 1990, David Broder, the “Dean” of American political journalism, wrote, “We cannot allow the 1990 elections to be another exercise in public disillusionment and political cynicism.” Anticipating some of the concerns in this book by eleven years, he argued that only the press could “step forward to police the campaign process, very much as we try to catch cheating and chicanery in government.” I am not sure how much “we” do try to do that anymore. It is hard to disagree with his call on the media to do more to serve a “genuine democracy:” by being more assertive “than in the past on the public’s right to hear its concerns discussed by the candidates—in ads, debates, and speeches—and far more conscientious in reporting those discussions when they have to take place. We have to reconnect politics and government—what happened in the campaign and what happens afterwards...”

In 1992, George Bush the elder, whom many media outlets had proclaimed a war hero in the aftermath of the Gulf War, used all the media assets of an office-holder and was pronounced invincible. The Jennifer Flowers sex scandal was given inordinate visibility in a clear indication that the personal lives of candidates were now fair play. Bush was beaten in part because of Bill Clinton’s genius as a campaigner, but in larger part because of an economic downturn.

The media was negative towards Clinton, reports Thomas E Patterson in his 1994 study *Out of Order* that looked at presidential election coverage over 32 years. “In 1992, more than 80 percent of the news coverage of the Democratic Party was negative” but, by then most journalists were negative towards all politicians and parties. “If Vietnam and Watergate marked a time when the press turned against the politicians, the recent period represents a time when the press has turned on them.” Is it any wonder that political participation has fallen off so dramatically?

In 1992, the average statement attributed to a candidate was only seven lines on the front page of *The New York Times*, usually presented through the interpretative lens of some journalist’s narrative and point of view. In 1960, the average continuous quote or paraphrase of a candidate was 20 lines. So the positions of candidates are not only compressed on TV, but in the written press as well. Who is getting the airtime? Thomas Patterson of Syracuse University studied the TV coverage in 1992, reporting, “For every minute the candidates spoke on network evening news, the reporters who were covering them talked six minutes . . . election news now focuses more

on journalists than on the candidates.”

In 1996, Bill Clinton beat Bob Dole in a race characterized by considerable mudslinging and media-baiting. Dole denounced the “liberal media elite” but the complaint didn’t seem to resonate with a public that does not perceive the media as liberal at all. Many studies would later show that the Washington press corps stands considerably to the right of the general public in many of its operative political beliefs.

It was later admitted by Dole supporters that they used the buzzword of a “liberal media elite” not because they believed it was true, but because it played well with certain core right-wing constituencies.

The Media Elite is Part of the Power Elite

Look closely at the critical assessments of the media’s role in recent contests and you find similar trends and emerging patterns that suggest that the media elite tends to identify with and regurgitate the attitudes of the political elite. It operates in a conservative way and tilts in a conservative direction. It enforces a mainstream middle ground paying scant attention to more critical views or progressive perspectives. It promotes a consensus view that is well to the right of most voters, especially on economic issues, social security and health care.

That may be one reason that both presidential candidates targeted their messages to the center, not to their core constituencies to the left and right. As the sociologist Herbert Gans showed convincingly years ago, the media focuses on those at or near the top of the hierarchies of power and those who threaten them. They are themselves a key cog in the power elite described by the sociologist C. Wright Mills whom I read as a college student in the sixties. Some might consider them a professional class that serves, and in individual cases becomes part of, a dominant elite or ruling political class.

Well-paid professional political consultants increasingly manage our elections, and politics, in the words of journalist Bill Kovach, has become “an electoral industry.” Its job is to control public attitudes through the press, what pols consider for their own purposes, “free media” (i.e. media exposure they don’t have to pay for.)

“During the presidential campaign vested interests focused press coverage

on one set piece “media event after another . . . reports reaching the public had been shaped in advance,” he complained in 1991 in a MediaChannel.org affiliate publication, Nieman Reports, the journal of Harvard’s Nieman Fellows in Journalism.

“The 1988 campaign reports in the main focused on “symbolic” issues preferred by the candidates,” he noted, adding that by the end of the 1980’s the press lost control of major editing functions: “The result has been control that reduces journalists to a role where they focus more and more on less and less fundamentally meaningful information at critical times. The result is a report to the public increasingly devoted to entertaining but relatively useless information on the mechanics of a campaign rather than the issues...”

Sound familiar? Nine years ago Kovach concluded that the “fault lies with the press itself,” which play along, in election after election, in a collusive arrangement trading favors and exposure for access. It has been co-opted, contained, and yes, controlled. In 2000, he became director of the Committee of Concerned Journalists, which published several detailed studies documenting a media tilt towards George W. Bush and away from a close look at the issues.

Little had changed. By 2000, presidential politics had, if anything, become more of an exercise in marketing and engineering voter approval, with spin-doctors and consultants in full command. Kovach (with Tom Rosenstiel) found an even worse situation, summing up the coverage in the pages of the Washington Monthly (“Campaign Lite: Why Reporters Won’t Tell Us What We Need To Know.”) this way:

“Taken together, the move inside campaigns, the loss of connection with voters, and the reliance on faulty story lines create a serious vulnerability in the modern campaign press culture. We have a better understanding than ever before of what is occurring inside campaigns at any moment. We have a stronger understanding of the horse race and more information about the strategies inside the campaigns. We know the ‘what’ of campaigns as never before, but we have little idea why.

Despite the televised debates and an extraordinary quantity of coverage of the campaign, the meaning of the 2000 election remains remarkably opaque. We know less about the underlying factors of this race than we did

at the time of other close races, including those in 1960, 1968, and 1976. . . . The definition of political reporting has been seriously thinned. This not only robs us of understanding; arguably, it makes it harder for the victor to govern. It also leads to press coverage of government as a continuing campaign, dictated by winning the war for the message of the day, and measured by another set of polls.”

One consequences of this approach; more of a focus on personality than substance. A smaller number of political donors financed campaigns, with relatively little attention paid to who the candidate was and what he or she stood for. There was less attention paid to who was financing each candidate and what their interests were.

It was only well after the election, on December 28, as George W. Bush assembled his “team” in Washington, that The Wall Street Journal reported on the back page of its first section that “Big GOP Contributors Look for Return on their Money.” The story reported that even before Bush took office, industry groups were lobbying for favors, tax breaks beneficial legislative “reforms” and favorable access. It noted that the securities and investment industries were particularly active on the strength of donating a record \$22.2 million.

The Center for Responsive Politics in Washington had tallied a total of \$91 million pumped into the Bush campaign from industry groups alone. Clearly, the donors saw their contributions as investments. (On March 26, 2001, the Journal would add up all the contributions, finding that Republicans raised \$301.5 million in hard money for their Presidential candidates while the Democrats lagged with \$93.4 million, less than a third of their well-heeled competitors. Total campaign contributions to the 2000 election set a new record of \$2.67 billion, a third of which ended up in the coffers of media organizations.

The Campaign-Media Finance Scandal

If politicians were becoming more indebted to big donors, the media had become more oriented to getting as much of that money as it could. Political coverage overall was cut way back on television even as political money sloshed through the networks and local stations. In February, the trade magazine *Broadcasting and Cable* inadvertently summed up the new relationship between broadcasters and electoral politics: “Happy Days Are

Here Again: Ad Dollars Piling up.”

As Paul Taylor reported in MediaChannel.org affiliate Mother Jones, “Broadcast television’s game plan for Election 2000 had been to reduce coverage, restrict candidate air time, and milk politicians for lots of expensive ads.” Politicians raised money—more than a billion dollars in 2000. Much of it went to media campaigns, largely to buy commercials benefiting media companies that have refused, for the most part, to give free airtime to candidates and have scuttled any attempts by regulators or legislators to require that they help take the big money out of politics by doing so.

Journalists are occasionally tasked to investigate where political money comes from, but rarely where it goes. The media itself is deeply implicated in America’s massive and seemingly permanent campaign finance scandal that clearly undermines democracy. “Majority rule takes on a whole new meaning when the majority of campaign cash comes from one tenth of one percent of Americans,” says Julia Hutchins of the Public Interest Research Group. The media donors are part of that tiny funding elite.

Is it any surprise then that studies of the media at election time report more airtime devoted to political ads than political reports? Usually those ads are run adjacent to news programs, often blurring for less savvy viewers the distinction between advocacy and journalism.

Is it a surprise that media companies give money back to political parties in the form of generous donations and also hire many ex-pols as well-connected political lobbyists to insure that their own agendas are served? Most of these political interventions by media companies are not mentioned in the media.

In a detailed report, “Off the Record,” the Center for Public Integrity noted that:

The number of registered, media-related lobbyists increased from 234 in 1996, the year the historic Telecommunications Act became law, to 284 in 1999. And last year, the amount of money spent on lobbyists was \$31.4 million, up 26.4 percent from the \$24.8 million spent in 1996.

Media companies lobby on issues ranging from protecting intellectual

property to eliminating the death tax. They've fought against restrictions on tobacco advertising in print and alcohol advertising on the air, lobbied for eliminating the FCC's rules designed to prevent the concentration of the public airwaves and the press in too few hands, and tried to block any attempt to give candidates free air time, a move that could reduce the cost of political campaigns.

In the 2000 election, both major party candidates received more than a million dollars in political donations from media interests; Vice President Al Gore took in \$1.16 million, Texas Governor George W. Bush received \$1.07 million.

From 1993 through June 30 2000, media corporations and their employees gave \$75 million in campaign contributions to candidates for federal office and to the two major political parties.

Blacking out the Primaries

Even though political analysts know that in American politics who gets selected is as important as who is elected, there was a virtual blackout of the primary campaigns and their debates. "Of a record 22 presidential debates televised through the Super Tuesday primaries in March, just two aired on a broadcast network and neither in prime time. The others were available exclusively on cable where they attracted smaller niche audiences," explained Paul Taylor. In fact, much of the political coverage was pushed onto cable outlets best known for confrontational talk shows and tabloid coverage.

"The 24 hour channels create a drumbeat of crisis—dramatic music under logos like 'The Presidency Under Fire'," says leading political journalist Carl Bernstein of Watergate fame. "They create an atmosphere that becomes self-fulfilling—a crisis atmosphere without a crisis. And they do precious little in-depth reporting, most of which has been done by the print media."

The Media Decline

In 1995, a Gallup survey found that leading journalists themselves acknowledge a decline in media performance:

1. The overall quality of the media is declining and basic

- principles of the journalism profession are being eroded.
2. The distinction between news and entertainment is increasingly obscured.
 3. TV and radio are gaining in influence but declining in journalistic quality while newspapers struggle to maintain quality and are losing influence.
 4. Media proprietors are more concerned with profits than product quality.
 5. The public is losing confidence in the media.

Why is this happening? According to Walter Cronkite, a MediaChannel.org advisor and legendary TV news anchor: “Our big corporate owners, infected with the greed that marks the end of the 20th Century, stretch constantly for ever increasing profit, condemning quality to the hindmost... compromising journalistic integrity in the mad scramble for ratings and circulation.”

In the five years since the Gallup survey findings, the situation has continued to decline, with even more mergers, and more acceptance of practices and programming that would have been unacceptable years ago. One of those practices was the actual downgrading of political coverage and analysis. At election 2000’s end, Time Magazine was characterizing its own coverage and the coverage of others as “electotainment,” comparing its style and approach to the coverage of earlier scandals even though there was nothing sexual or salacious about it. By downplaying politics, by treating it as boring and unimportant, or treating it in a routine predictable manner, media coverage actually dampens participation and promotes skepticism and disengagement.

Voters respond less to specifics than to the overall media environment. Justin Lewis, Michael Morgan and Sut Jhalley analyzed survey data in 1998 showing, “consistent systematic misperceptions” among the public. “People are less likely to be informed by particular details of news coverage than by an overall oft-repeated framework.” Their survey found that the leadership of both major parties and the media is well to the right of public opinion on many issues—an issue “the mainstream media is reluctant to raise.”

The Media Framework

Many of the contributions in this book speak to just what that “oft-repeated” media framework was in 2000. The often-unexamined truth is that politics in America cannot exist apart from the media. In news divisions, there is

a cross-pollination between the political and media worlds as politicians frequently “cross the street” to become on-air pundits and reporters. This cross-mobility only underscores shared values and worldviews.

Politicians know that the whole exercise is designed to get their message in the media. This is nothing new, but the techniques for engineering media attention have developed in sophistication since Joe McGinnis wrote *The Selling of the President* in 1968, which was based on his insider access to the Nixon campaign.

Hubert Humphrey, who lost to Nixon that year, discovered this a bit too late. “I’m fighting packaged politics,” he said. “It’s an abomination for a man to place himself completely in the hands of the technicians, the ghost writers, the experts, the pollsters and come out only as an attractive package. The biggest mistake in my political life was not to learn how to use television.”

That was 1968. By the year 2000, media coverage of politics increasingly resembled sports commentary, in which the members of a largely Washington-based “commentariat” trade on insider information and perfect the art of debating polarized issues with as many clichés and predictable prejudices as they can muster. Their focus is usually on the horse race and the polls, rarely on the issues.

The constant reporting and punditry about polls has an anti-democratic effect even when some of the opinion surveys appear to accurately measure responses to selected questions. Sociologist S. Herbst, who studied how citizens construct their own sense of reality after reading about such polls, showed in a 1993 study that they influence public opinion as much or more than simply measuring it. “Polls are believed to suppress critical thinking, and to dictate questions a society asks itself as well as the range of possible answers. The people I spoke with seemed to understand just how polling restricts debate on their own issues of concern,” she writes.

Pundits Replace Reporters

The media increasingly substitute highly opinionated punditry for enterprising reporting. Issues are deliberately framed in centrist ways that turn a lack of substantive difference into Solomonic policy disputes with the weightiest of consequences.

When the shows are over, this army of well paid and self satisfied commentators retire to their clubhouses on the Hill or to intersecting private lives in which their kids all attend the same schools and play in the same soccer leagues. They are all part of the same culture and class. Most are white. The majority tilt to the right. Chris Mathews, host of Hardball, identifies himself as a centrist, although he told an audience of students at New York's New School in late April 2001 that he considers himself conservative on most issues. "Yet many of my viewers think I'm a communist," he said with a shrug.

Democracy at Risk

In these pages, you will encounter voices that argue that democracy itself is threatened as much by the media as by the special interests that finance our election spectacles. At its simplest, democracy implies the informed participation of the people. Not surprisingly, the two presidential campaigns targeted the so-called swing voters; the people pollsters agree are the least informed and hence subject to the most simplistic, slogan-laced appeals.

"Will we lose our democracy because of the media?" asks Benjamin Barber, a leading scholar of democratic ideas and director of the Walt Whitman Center of Democracy at Rutgers University in New Jersey. Other voices sound similar alarms as a growing chorus of scholars and journalists lament the decline of media quality even as more media "choices" proliferate. True, there are a lot more channels, but it's also true that there are far fewer voices.

That a free and independent press is the centerpiece of democracy is an article of faith in the United States. The Founding Fathers amended the Constitution to enshrine freedom of the press, and it remains one of our most carefully guarded rights. And yet, in an age of media concentration, press freedom is increasingly defined in a manner that benefits corporate needs and not public interests.

Rights and Responsibilities

The rights of the media are well known, but what of its responsibilities? Do media consumers and citizens have any right to protection against abuses by the media, or for that matter a right to be informed accurately and honestly? There are lemon laws to protect car buyers, as well there

should be. But there are no laws—and perhaps there never can be—or even codes of conduct to protect our society from having our political system trivialized or just ignored.

As many analysts have explained, the dumbing down of news and information is well advanced, a phenomenon that plays into all of this directly. While there is and continues to be political bias in media reporting as I've mentioned—Gore, for example, was presented negatively for many months leading up to the Democratic convention, while Ralph Nader and other third party candidates were rarely presented at all—there is a more pronounced bias against context, background, and identification of the interests at stake in any issue, or the phony controversies that often conceal them.

Yet there is no doubt that candidates suffer when they are presented negatively in the media as Media Tenor's tracking of the election coverage on the MediaChannel.org documented week after week. The Project for Excellence in Journalism also released a study confirming Media Tenor's findings, concluding, "the press has been far more likely to convey that Bush is a different kind of Republican—a 'compassionate conservative,' a reformer, bipartisan—than to discuss Al Gore's experience, or knowledge."

"Flori-duh"

We have left for last what all media outlets lead with: what happened in Florida. To voters there is one centerpiece to this story—and one that has yet to be fully investigated. What is already clear is that what happened there is not yet fully known and may never be.

A story that may have helped explain the confusion in Florida only came out in mid-January when an election official reminded the media that Florida Governor Jeb Bush had vetoed a Voter Education program passed by the legislature. Sadly, news stories like this continue to trickle out and are rarely linked by the media to what happened on November 7th.

By year end, as absentee ballots were counted in other states, Gore added 200,000 votes to his tally, giving him a half a million vote edge in the popular vote over an opponent who "won" by a one vote margin in the Electoral College after a one vote margin on the Supreme Court gave him all of Florida's electoral votes.

Newspapers and other publications are involved in their own re count of the ballots under Florida's Freedom of Information. Whatever the outcome, it is academic now. The candidate who swept the popular vote nationwide may finally be shown to have won a majority in Florida but it no longer seems to matter.

The Electoral College and then the Congress confirmed the results. "Dubya" Bush is in power in Washington, and despite the talk of bipartisanship, has assembled a partisan Cabinet of conservative stalwarts, many recycled from earlier Republican administrations. By acting presidential, he sought, and was quickly granted legitimacy and validation in the media, even though over 45% of the people polled in one survey expressed dissatisfaction and a whopping 42% believed he did not win.

To underscore the meaning of these figures, bear in mind that only half of the eligible voters even went to the polls. Of those that did, each candidate received about 48% of this low turnout, or 24% of those eligible. Other surveys established that about half of those who voted for Bush and Gore said they did so not because they liked the candidate but because they didn't like his opponent. This leaves us with a President taking power with only 12% strong approval rating among voters. Talk about indifference!

Once Al Gore gave his well-sculpted prime time concession speech, the media shifted its focus away from the uncertainties of the process, instead promoting an acceptance of its outcome no matter what doubts remained. A media consensus dissolved an environment of confusion and replaced it with certainty and acceptance. Relieved that there was no constitutional crisis, they overlooked a deeper crisis of democracy.

World Opinion Unimportant

Overseas, some opinion leaders sneered and poked fun at a country that has long lectured the world on democracy and "free" elections. With tongue in cheek, they offered to send election observers to America, just as the U.S. has dispatched observers to their regions. Their critical focus was also on the seemingly widespread "irregularities," often referred to in our media as mere "anomalies" that were then usually characterized as inevitable.

The television reports zeroed in almost exclusively on those "dimpled chads," which predictably became a running joke. It was only months later

that the Palm Beach Post reported that the butterfly ballot cost Al Gore about 6,600 votes in Palm Beach County. But that news was barely reported nationwide. According to Frank Rich of the New York Times, “It felt like an episode of *The Twilight Zone* to pass through Florida last weekend. There, splashed over most of the front page of Sunday’s Palm Beach Post, was the paper’s investigative scoop: Palm Beach County’s butterfly ballot cost Al Gore ‘about 6,600 votes, more than 10 times what he needed to overcome George W. Bush’s slim lead in Florida.’

“It felt like *The Twilight Zone* because beyond Palm Beach—or Boca, at any rate—who knew or cared? I turned on my TV and had to search to find a mention of the Post’s story. It might as well have been a hallucination,” he adds, “This is less an indictment of the national media than a political reality, “but it is an indictment of the media nonetheless.

Other media recounts, such as one by the Miami Herald and USA Today generated even more confusion. They reviewed 64,248 Florida ballots concluding that George W. Bush would have prevailed had the U.S. Supreme Court permitted a recount of Florida’s disputed Vote. The headline bolstered Bush’s legitimacy but like earlier press reports was misleading. As *The Nation* magazine reported, “the stories beneath the headlines—particularly those in the Herald itself—reveal an entirely different reality:

In fact, as the Herald editors themselves concede, there is no way of knowing whether a real recount would have produced a Bush win because “there is no way to be certain how canvassing boards in each county would have judged each ballot.” A Herald editorial even acknowledged that had “every mark, dimple, pinprick or hanging chad” that appeared to suggest a voter’s intention to support either Bush or Gore been counted, “Gore would be in the White House today.

Concluded *Nation* columnist John Nichols, “The post-election waters are as muddy today as they were on the morning on November 8, when bleary-eyed television anchormen retracted their retractions of their previous retractions and finally admitted, ‘We still really don’t know who was elected president.’” Will we ever know is the question. As Alex Jones of Harvard University’s Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy wrote in the *New York Times*:

“The answer is tough investigations of what happened in the voting and

the vote counting, uncompromised by the false notion that avoidance of controversy will be healing. The answer is also tough reporting on what happened in Florida that does not confuse fairness with the unsatisfactory practice of quoting one strident and then its opposite in every story . . . Without question, there needs to be more reporting.”

Media Silence on Minority Voters

The media paid far less serious attention or devoted much airtime to the many complaints by minority voters and civil rights groups about serious violations of federal laws guaranteeing voting rights. On March 10, the United States Civil Rights Commission issued a preliminary report of its investigations concluding that irregularities were widespread in Florida and included such problems as voter intimidation, confusing ballots and the purging of eligible voters from the rolls. Some black Floridians, they said, who attempted to vote in November faced discrimination, including possible violations of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. “It appears at this phase of the investigation that the evidence may ultimately support findings of prohibited discrimination.” Republicans on the panel and Florida Governor Jeb Bush denounced the findings.

London based journalist Greg Palast describes in these pages his investigative findings about the improper uses and misuses of a law to block felons and ex-felons from voting. His startling findings, as he recounts, never appeared in the U.S. mainstream press.

So will we ever know the truth? David Corn of *The Nation* calls the situation a “fog” because of all the different election standards affecting the undervotes and overvotes. He reports that a consortium of media organizations has paid for review of 180,000 votes statewide, but that their data can be crunched in different ways. “With most reviews producing results that trend in Gore’s favor, it appears clear that had this been a better run contest—with better machines, better poll workers (who carefully followed instructions)—Gore would have triumphed. . . . The ultimate truth is probably beyond reach,” he concludes. None of this was reported at the time. Adequate and sustained media attention was just not paid to these critical issues.

Worst of all, absolutely no serious attention was paid to the role played by the media in all this, nor was there much industry soul-searching. Information is now emerging that shows that the media itself was complicit in a variety

of election scandals. The Alliance for Better Campaigns detailed in a March 2001 report how the television industry profited on the surge of political ad spending while cutting back on coverage. Their findings charge that many stations gouged candidates, in violation of a federal law.

This media dimension of the problem may be a more dangerous and enduring threat to democracy than the problem of dimpled chads. Reforms in vote counting are likely in the aftermath of the Florida debacle. Reforms of media practices are not yet on anyone's agenda. They should be.

Until they are, America's electoral democracy will remain as manipulated as ever. And if that is allowed to stand, the people will continue to lose, no matter who wins

Coda: Slowly political activists are discovering the importance of challenging the media malfeasance documented in this book. Conservatives have long crusaded against what they, falsely in my view, label the "liberal media." Meanwhile the far more ingrained conservatism of the corporate press has been largely unchallenged. This may be changing.

On April 6, 2001, a coalition of political groups targeted Rupert Murdoch's Fox News Channel, a cable channel run by former Reagan political advisor Roger Ailes, with a mid-day demonstration denouncing media silence on what they called a "stolen election." "Fox's actions made it a participant in the election, not merely an observer," they charged. Conservatives countered with hectoring chants and a pamphlet that asked, "Is Fox News Right Wing or Merely Right?"

When I put the same question to the woman distributing the pamphlet, she acknowledged the network's rightist orientation. Fox sent an urn of coffee out to the protesters who conducted their rally in a downpour but it went untouched. Mark Crispin Miller, an NYU professor and director of the Project on Media Ownership noted that Al Gore had just hosted Fox owner Rupert Murdoch at his journalism class at Columbia University, suggesting that their relationship may be why Gore has been silent on the media role. "We need more than election reform," he asserted. If democracy is to be revived, we need thorough media reform as well."

The prospects of a transformation of the media may be remote unless and until more of the people who were outraged by the "theft" of the 2000

election begin focusing on the corporate media's collusion. When put in a larger context of the shift in power from the public to the private in this era of globalization, the idea of democracy itself could become passé.

Colin Crouch of the European University Institute, chairman of the editorial board of the *Political Quarterly*, argues that the democratic moment has passed and, in the West at least, we are moving into a post-democratic age.

As power becomes increasingly concentrated in the hands of a professionalized political elite and—more insidiously—in the corporate world, the potential for the mass of ordinary people to participate actively in public life is diminished. Even elections like the one in 2000 are being seen as a manipulated and empty ritual, if not a farce. Are these trends inevitable? What options are available?

What is to be done?

7. WARRING WITH THE WORDS OF WAR

The Terror Era has not only radicalized our domestic politics and foreign policies, it infects our language. Our vocabulary has undergone a paradigm shift along with government policies. Conversations are now peppered with terms we rarely heard or thought much about before 9/11. (Before 9/11, no one even marked dates that way. Sure, there was 24/7, but that's not the same.) Few of our "new" words are new—but the frequency of usage certainly is.

Words are weapons or their extensions and often used as such. Many are the lethal offspring of an alphabet of anguish, a lexicon of slanted war speak. Orwell would have been right at home, but for the rest of us, it is often uncomfortable finding these terms bubbling up almost involuntarily from within. "News language" has a way of fusing with our own language in the same way that babies absorb the lingo, accents and phrasing of their parents. What we hear again and again in the media embeds itself in the inner voice. We recycle what is repeated; Pavlov understood this more than Orwell, but nevermind.

So here is an armchair linguist and news dissector's A-Z in progress. Help me fill in the blanks.

A Allah, Axis, Assets, Alert; ABC—Atomic Biological Chemical, Anthrax., Al Jazeera, aluminum tubes, Al Samud Missiles, American Fries (in protest against French Fries); AAR - After action report, amphetamines (supplied to exhausted pilots who bomb Canadian allies in friendly fire incidents in Afghanistan)

B Breaking News, Bio-Terror Baghdad, Basra, Black Hawk Down, Box Cutter, Botchilinum, Burka, Baath Party, Bush "Doctrine," We have our marching orders: My fellow Americans, let's roll."; "We have also seen the true nature of these terrorists."

C Caves, Condoleezza, cells, of the sleeper and awake varieties, CC (Central Command); Clash of Civilizations, Crusade, CNN effect, coalition (of the willing); centrifuges, Collateral Language (or damage, collateral.), Combatants, illegal, Chicken Hawk, C2 - command and control, Civil Liberties (huh?)

D Duct Tape, Desert Spring; Delta force, Detainees, Dirty Bomb, Democracy (in Iraq, not the US), Drones, Daisy Cutters, (not be confused with the country called Cutter but spelled Qatar; Dead or Alive (lose alive), Deployment. Disarmament (them, not us),

E Embed, Embedded, evil, Evildoer, Evil, Axis of, E-bomb

F. Fundamentalism, Foreign Fighters, Friendlies, (the soldiers we like), Fights Back (as in America); Franks (Tommy); Food for Oil

G. Ground Zero; Gitmo, Guantanamo, Geneva Conventions (now irrelevant); Geraldo (see force of nature)

H Homeland, Homicide Bombers, Hamas, Hezbollah, Holy War, House to House, Hindu Kush, Hazmats, Hajj, Halliburton (rarely mentioned) Human Rights (no longer relevant)

I. Infidel, Inspections, IAEA, IO (Information Operations as in “Information is the Currency of Victory”), IDF, Imam, Interrogate, Interrogation, Islamabad. ISI (Pakistani Intelligence), Intifada (again), Infant Mortality, Imperialism, word not used on television

J. Jihad Junkie, Journalists (endangered species), “Just War” (no longer italicized)

K. Kurds, Kurdistan, Kabul, Kunduz, Kandahar, Kashmir, KC-10A Extender jets

L. Likud, Likudnick, Line of Control, (Kashmir); Liberation (of Iraq, not USA), Love (forget it)

M. Moab Bomb (“mother of all bombs): Muslim World, Madrassa, Mullah, one eyed, Mastermind, Material Breach, Mobile Labs, Mustard Gas, Mazar I-Sharif, Mujahadeen, Mecca, Mistake (not used)

N. Northern Alliance, No Blood for Oil, Not in My Name, Nonpermanent members

O OBL, Omar, Operation Mountain Lion, Operation Anaconda, Operation Infinite Justice. Operation Enduring Freedom, Old Europe (as opposed to new)

P Perception Management; profiling, P 5 or Perm 5, once the Big Five on the Security Council; Patriot Act, Patriotically Correct, Pens (Demonstration Areas), Preemptive Strike, Proxies, Poodle (see Blair, Tony) Prisoners of War (quaint term, seldom used), Peace (term no longer used). "Power of the Blood" (Hymn often cited)

Q Qaeda, Al; Quran, Queasy

R Regime Change, Rummy, Radiological Weapon, "Real" Journalism (Fox News slogan). Republican Guards (Special), Racin, RO-R) (Roll on and Roll Off), The Raven (Bush's favorite book about Sam Houston)

S Sarin, Sheikh, Saddam (as in Showdown with Saddam,) Soft Targets, State Sponsored, Suicide Bombers, Satellite channels, Security Alerts (High, Elevated, Highest, Yellow, Orange, Red), Settlements, Smart Bombs, Smallpox, Smoke 'em out, Stealth (B2 bombers, fighters, technology); Spin Cycles, Sunni, Shiite, Shock and Awe, SUV's, SecDef - Secretary of Defense, Sanctions, impact of (rarely mentioned in media)

T Tape, Duct (again); Terror, Terrorist, Terrorism, Taliban, Turbinators (anti-Taliban); Tora Bora,, (as opposed to Japanese War cry Tora Tora Tora and not to be confused with Israeli Hora), TIA (Total Information Awareness); Twin Towers, Tribunal, Traitors (Whoever Fox News Disagrees With), Torture, word never used on television, This Just In (now used interchangeably by CNN with Breaking News), Truth (first casualty of war)

U. UAV (unmanned aerial vehicle, UNMOVIC, UNSCOM, U-2, (sans Bono) Urban Warfare, USCINCCENT - Commander-in-Chief, United States Central Command

V Veto, VX, Vigilance, Virgin, virgins, as in 70 or 99 or the magical number of maidens waiting in Paradise to reward martyrs, Warlord (ours and theirs)

W Weaponize, WTC, WMD, WUF (Weapons Unaccounted For) Virtual March, War on Terror, Willing (our friends in coalition), Wahabism, Willing, coalition of the

X Xterminate, Xfiltrate, X journalist

Y You Decide (They Distort)

Z Zalmay Khalilzad, US envoy to Kurdish opposition, was US envoy to Afghan opposition, was oil company envoy to Taliban. Zerbisias, Antonia, Media Columnist, Toronto Star who dissects all of these terms.

These are the words we hear nightly on TV. Soon to become the mainstay of crossword puzzles, scrabble games and William Safire columns. Is this all a joke?

No way, argue the authors of the book, *Collateral Language*, who explain, “language matters in the most concrete, immediate way possible; its use by political and military leaders leads directly to violence...” They call on all of us, “in our ability to make words mean something different... instead of allowing these words to blind us into consent, we can demand their legitimate use,”

8. EVIL: THE 'E' WORD

Who and what are evil in today's world? Is "evil" a moral category or a political description? Or both? Evoking fear, it can have multiple meanings.

In "Austin Powers," the bad guy, a mad man out to conquer the world, was named "Dr. Evil." Now, that Hollywood joke has taken a decidedly unfunny turn.

The Jan. 13 Newsweek splashed a picture of North Korea's Kim Jong Il on its cover, labeling him "North Korea's Dr. Evil." And they weren't kidding.

Neither was Osama bin Laden when he denounced the West as the home of "evil" infidels. Nor was George W. Bush when he responded with a two-barreled use of the E-word, calling terrorists "evil doers" and defining our enemies as an "axis of evil."

Has the word evil, in current usage, been turned into a synonym for Satan? Where did this designation of "evil" come from? And why is it being used the way it is?

"Evil" is a "hot-button word," projecting moral certainty and tough attitude. It is a useful tool for polarization, dividing the world into "us, the good" and "them, the bad."

All sides of the spectrum tap it to add righteousness to their evangelic crusades and political advocacy. Recently, I received a fax from a Dallas preacher, promoting his "Evil Unmasked" TV show. A day later, I received an e-mail urging I visit a Web site called "evilGOPbastards."

"Evil" is used by all sides of the terror war. The New Yorker references a new book by David Frum, who coined "axis of hatred" in response to a White House assignment "to provide a justification for a war" against Iraq. Higher-ups changed his term to "axis of evil" to make it sound more "theological."

Evil as a phrase comes more from the world of propaganda than politics.

And its use is calculated, says scholar Laura Redieh in an essay on “evil” in the new book, “Collateral Language.”

She writes, “The rhetoric of Bush’s speeches and news conferences shows the construction of the kind of ideology of good versus evil that is meant to justify a violent militaristic response.

“He employs clever rhetorical strategies that play on both our wishful thinking and our fears in order to persuade by emotion rather than logic.”

Unfortunately, critics who reject this lexicon are rarely heard or seen in our media. And that may be the biggest evil among all of the evils in and outside the many axes we operate within.

9. WHAT'S A JOURNALIST TO DO WHEN THE POLITICAL GETS PERSONAL?

When you write about the world, or report on what's happening "over there," the issues can seem far away enough to permit disengagement. The distance encourages detachment and objectification. When warring peoples are labeled into neat packages and treated the way two competing sports teams might, coverage can get desensitized.

The world can then look like a chessboard, as it appears to many policymakers and pundits who move the toy soldiers in their minds across the maps of their imaginations. A writer named Tom White from Odessa Texas was commenting about this tendency that one sees in journalism all the time. He raised the issue in the way an "expert" was quoted in Nicholas Lemman's brilliant policy dissection of "The Next World order" in a recent issue of *The New Yorker*. "What caught my eye," he explains, "more than anything else in the piece was Lemman's rendering of an interview with Ken Pollack, who was, he said, the National Security Council's staff expert on Iraq during the last years of the Clinton Administration.

Here are Lemman's prize lines on Pollack: 'When I went to see him at his office in Washington, with a little encouragement he got out from behind his desk and walked over to his office wall, where three maps of the Middle East were hanging.

"The only way to do it is a full-scale invasion," he said, using a pen as a pointer. "We're talking about two grand corps, two to three hundred thousand people altogether. The population is here, in the Tigris-Euphrates valley." He pointed to the area between Baghdad and Basra. "Ideally, you'd have the Saudis on board."

He pointed to the Prince Sultan Air Base, near Riyadh. "You could make Kuwait the base, but it's much easier in Saudi. You need to take western Iraq and southern Iraq" pointing again, "because otherwise they'll fire Scuds at Israel and at Saudi oil fields. You probably want to prevent Iraq from blowing up its own oil fields, so troops have to occupy them.

And you need troops to defend the Kurds in northern Iraq." Point, point. "You go in as hard as you can, as fast as you can." He slapped his hand of

the top of his desk. “You get the enemy to divide his forces, by threatening him in two places at once.” His hand hit the desk again, hard. “Then you crush him.”

White then comments, “Nice, vivid writing you will agree. ...Grown men used to play with painted lead soldiers reenacting the Civil War or the campaigns of Napoleon. Clearly, the fun has not gone out of that kind of thing for men like Pollack. You’d hardly think he was talking of human beings. Indeed, he’ll SMASH the Iraqis. He and his army of two or three hundred thousand people, two grand corps, whatever.”

Ok, Pollack is banging the table the way so many other military planners must be doing these days. They just can’t wait to take on the dreaded Saddam, another larger than life “evil doer” who is being media demonized by the moment, most recently in the pages of both the Atlantic and Vanity Fair. Admittedly, he is not a nice guy, and I would cheer his overthrow even though many of the same military planners scheming for a “regime change” were involved in arming him to the teeth to fight Iran in the 1980’s.

But, hey, wait a minute, what about the people who are in the way when the marines come SMASHING through?

Journalists like England’s John Pilger are worried about them. The reason: he’s met them and feels an empathetic connection that often gets lost in media coverage that treats human suffering in terms of the body count, or that fails to distinguish between rulers and the ruled.

Listen:

“I have seen the appalling state of the children of Iraq. I have sat next to an Iraqi doctor in a modern hospital while she has turned away parents with children suffering from cancers that are part of what they call a “Hiroshima epidemic” - caused, according to several studies, by the depleted uranium that was used by the US and Britain in the Gulf War and is now carried in the dust of the desert. Not only is Iraq denied equipment to clean up its contaminated battlefields, but also cancer drugs and hospital equipment.”

His report goes on, but the point I making is that Pilger’s personal presence there gave him a vantage point that few of the many Iraq bashers have had. Sadly, it is far easier for journalists to personally disconnect from the

human realities of this conflict or any other. That is why, for instance, that reporters who covered Vietnam are far more skeptical than men of the gee-whiz crowd in Afghanistan.

In my case, to get personal for a minute, it is impossible for me not to get personal about what's happening in the Middle East and how it is being covered, a subject I write about daily on NewsDissector.net. My editor of that effort comes from a family of holocaust survivors. She lives in a complex emotional universe of fear and pro-Israeli conviction. We share many values. We quarrel constantly but I know how vexed she is about Sharon, and at the same time, all the hate directed at Jews. I can feel her pain, as well as the feelings of families who have lost children in terror attacks and suicide bombings. We can't be callous about these losses.

But, the pain of one community mustn't blind us to the pain of their Palestinian counterparts. Or to the history of the conflict.

Noam Chomsky, who comes from a family of Rabbis, makes this point as hard as it may be for some on the Israeli side to hear. He writes, "There is no symmetry in this confrontation, not the slightest, and to frame it in terms of Israeli self-defense goes beyond even standard forms of distortion in the interests of power.

The harshest condemnations of Palestinian terror, which are proper and have been for over 30 years, leave these basic facts unchanged." Note: he condemns terrorism but most supporters of Israel just tune them out.

As I write, I am reading about an educational TV station in Ramallah that was just trashed by the Israeli army. A few years ago, the journalists and educators who launched the channel as a democratic counterpoint to the authoritarianism of the Palestinian Authority and the Islamic fundamentalist militants visited our offices to seek help for their plans to create an independent media voice. We had a lot in common. I was pleased to follow their progress as well as their conflicts with their own government.

Today, after having had its offices invaded, Al Quds TV is in ruins.

Two days earlier, a friend gave an independent filmmaker, another Palestinian, my phone number. She called from Bethlehem, hoping we could help her get the news out about what was happening in her hometown. Suddenly a

conflict I was watching on TV was in my ear. Literally in the form of a real person. Her house was surrounded by tanks, she told me. “What did we, the ordinary people here, do to deserve this, she asked?” Click? The phone was soon cut off as was her electricity and water.

And then, I started thinking about an exchange I witnessed between two young teenagers, one Israeli and one Palestinian, who had become fast friends in the Seeds of Peace camp, The program was organized by John Wallach, a journalist who, after years of covering the conflict, was moved to do something about it by creating an oasis of conflict resolution, hope and dialogue.

One day in the camp, as I was filming the spirit of comradeship, the Israeli youth explained that he would soon be drafted into the Army. And the Palestinian, who was literally on his arm, said, “yeah and if he invades my neighborhood, he will shoot me.” He laughed but the Israeli boy did not.

I wonder where they are today?

And I wonder, as well, where my colleagues in the news business are. I have heard reports from a friend at a local TV station here in New York City that their newsroom has been charged with internal debate between black journalists and some white Christians and Jews wangling over the need for more even handed coverage even as all of New York’s politicians pander to Jewish voters by uncritically backing Israel and never wasting a word of sorrow for the innocent people, including an American woman, killed in the cross-fire.

Years ago, activists used to say that the personal is the political. Today, for me, this news is becoming more personal, leading to debates with friends and family members who, in some instances, react more as knee jerk members of a tribe than as citizens in a global community committed to compassion and human rights for all.

Finally, an irony in the age of media convergence: The New York Times today reported that it has invested \$100 million dollars in a new Discovery Network called Civilization. This news about the news reminded me of the famous comment by Mahatma Gandhi who was asked what he thought of western civilization. He paused for a nano-second and replied, “It would be a good idea.”

10. TRUTH IS A BATTLE

The third anniversary of the war came, and the third anniversary went, and an opportunity for media outlets to offer hardnosed assessments on the state of the conflict or reflect on their own coverage flashed by as quickly as one of those network logos.

It was news business as usual with a few minor exceptions and little deviation from the template of an pro-war media-frame, even as more critical comments percolated through - usually from people wearying of the story and upset because the invasion has not been more effective. USA Today even reported that one out of four Americans admitted the war had, at one point or another, made them cry.

If the outcome had been different with a clear-cut victory, a real “mission accomplished” or a decisive bad-guys-gone/good-guys-win formulation, we would be seeing parades and we told-you-so’s all over the media. Reality forced media outlets to tone down the celebratory tones we saw when the war was originally being described as a “cake-walk.”

At the advice of his media managers, President Bush remained upbeat, jumping out in public early to reinforce his policy with a series of political campaign-like speeches and the promulgation of a “new” strategy document based entirely on an old one. It was a PR maneuver straight out of the information war-info dominance playbook in which positioning is everything, i.e. the person who defines the issue first shapes the news.

In his case, the President was mindful of the erosion of public support and so careful not to even use the word “war.” Democracy is now his buzzword du jour. His rhetoric sought to do what his Pentagon couldn’t - convert defeat into a victory. This media strategy is designed as a pro-active way to manage perceptions because everyone else is then forced to react to you. After several sound-alike speeches, he appealed to the public to leave the war behind as in “let’s not talk about it anymore.”

Not everyone in the press played along. The AP carried an analysis showing how the President’s speechwriters cited quotes from “straw men” to concoct phony arguments that he then verbally knocked down. I saw that story on YAHOO, not on the air.

OPERATION SWARMER

With a two billion dollar media budget, the Pentagon staged its own media anniversary war game with a special military maneuver tantalizingly titled “Operation Swarmer.” They know that the TV cameras need pictures, so we were treated to images of an armada of helicopters out to “smoke out” some terrorists instead of the nightly display of dead bodies. Like film producers they “deployed” Hollywood narrative technique to create a visual storyline infused with the “bang bang” that networks love, along with an animation showing how their gung-ho tactics are “making progress.”

It was this made for TV media story that spun the anniversary on the ground, until a few days later when TIME came out to report that the whole staged spectacle “fizzled.”

Time’s man on the spot writes:

“But contrary to what many, many television networks erroneously reported, the operation was by no means the largest use of airpower since the start of the war. (‘Air Assault’ is a military term that refers specifically to transporting troops into an area.) In fact, there were no air strikes and no leading insurgents were nabbed in an operation that some skeptical military analysts described as little more than a photo op. What’s more, there were no shots fired at all and the units had met no resistance, said the U.S. and Iraqi commanders.”

DOWNPLAYED STORIES:

1. Escalating Costs

The non-partisan Congressional Research Service reported that funding for the war we are supposedly winning will go up. U.S. military spending in Iraq and Afghanistan will average 44 percent more in the current fiscal year. Spending will rise to \$9.8 billion a month from the \$6.8 billion a month the Pentagon said it spent last year, the research service said.

2. The Role of Oil

Greg Palast is one of the few journalists to suggest that President Bush’s upbeat assessment is less about the war - which is seen as a means to an

end, not and end itself - but about oil.

He writes about a “323-page plan for Iraq’s oil secretly drafted by the State Department.... what’s inside this thick Bush diktat: a directive to Iraqis to maintain a state oil company that will ‘enhance its relationship with OPEC.’”

“Enhance its relationship with OPEC? How strange: the government of the United States ordering Iraq to support the very OPEC oil cartel that is strangling our nation with outrageously high prices for crude.

“Specifically, the system ordered up by the Bush cabal would keep a lid on Iraq’s oil production - limiting Iraq’s oil pumping to the tight quota set by Saudi Arabia and the OPEC cartel. There you have it. Yes, Bush went in for the oil - not to get MORE of Iraq’s oil, but to prevent Iraq producing TOO MUCH of it.”

True? Maybe - but who in the media is even looking into this? Iraq’s leading resource is barely covered.

3. The Morale of Iraqis

We rarely hear from Iraqis in the media so the anniversary was not an exception. Why is it, as Harpers reports nearly 47% of the Iraqis cheer when their American “liberators” are shot? (Only 7% approve of attacks on Iraqi security forces.) Voices such as that of the blogger Riverbend, who oppose occupation, are largely invisible in our media. She writes in her Baghdad Burning Blog:

“In many ways, this year is like 2003 prior to the war when we were stocking up on fuel, water, food and first aid supplies and medications. We’re doing it again this year but now we don’t discuss what we’re stocking up for. Bombs and B-52’s are so much easier to face than other possibilities...”

“Three years and the electricity is worse than ever. The security situation has gone from bad to worse. The country feels like it’s on the brink of chaos once more- but a pre-planned, pre-fabricated chaos being led by religious militias and zealots.”

True? Quite possibly, but who is looking into the forces behind this

developing conflict?

4. The Media Coverage

MediaChannel.org, with the support of media reform groups and United for Peace and Justice (UFPJ), held a march on the media last week. Press releases went to all media outlets. Efforts to meet with media executives most major media outlets failed as newsrooms largely ignored it. The Spanish language newspaper covered a protest at CBS in LA, not the LA Times. People in Toronto read more about it the Globe and Mail than people in New York. Their reporter Simon Houpt was the only one in the media capital of the world to show up.

He wrote. “The thinking was that the networks and major newspapers have helped to create a repressive climate in which dissonant and dissident voices aren’t welcome. Some people on the fringes feel news executives are as responsible for the war as the White House.”

“The plan for the Manhattan protest was to trace a path through the corridors of power — or, rather, along the perimeter of that power, since the group’s request to meet with media executives had been universally ignored.”

Forget the phrase “people on the fringes” - a predictable put-down, probably inserted by his editor - and reflect on the totally unreported fact that 157,000 emails were sent by supporters to network news programs demanding better coverage as part of this call for truth. As for other protests around the world. They were covered but their size was given more prominence than their message.

The issue may have failed to grasp the media’s attention—probably because it is too close to home but the context has not. All media analysts know that the mighty mainstream media (MSM) machine is losing readers and viewers in part because of the groupthink manner in which it sanitized the war and remains largely unwilling to challenge it, even on this third anniversary. No doubt, the public is ahead of the press.

11. A PRE-MORTEM OF ELECTION COVERAGE

As the political race races on the campaign of 2004 has become nastier with the media at the center of the devolution of our politics. Polarization politics and personal attacks have never been as vicious.

The latest GOP ad on the air in Colorado and other battleground states features a menacing bloodthirsty wolf representing the terrorist threat that the Bush campaign claims it will save America from. It is scary and another representation of the fear mongering that is at the center of the debate. The negative ads are everywhere with few correctives in the news

Ad watcher Kathleen Hall Jamison says, according to Fred Brown of the Denver Post that impact of negative advertising may be a primal survival instinct. "People remember what's bad--the negative--because it's more likely to hurt them or eat them." Eat them?

Mike Cummings at the University of Colorado says that campaigning is more negative, and candidates are less shy about "savaging" their opponents.

The viciousness on TV is not confined to the TV screens. A local story reports that "Littleton teenager Aaron Oster-Beal: awoke to the find the family's Kerry Edwards yard sign covered with a rude surprise--a pile of dog excrement."

Talk about a campaign that's become, to put it bluntly if crudely: full of shit.

And where is the news media while all of this is going on. They are selling the ads and fanning the flames with more heat than light. Any number of studies have attacked the press for poor reporting.

One recent incident in the Columbia Journalism Review's Campaign Desk. org offered a case in point:

"Yesterday morning, President Bush visited campaign reporters in the back of Air Force One. It was a marked departure for the reporters ensconced in the press section of the plane. Though Bush regularly stopped back to chat with reporters during his 2000 campaign, yesterday's surprise visit was just

the third time he has popped in since his election -- and, indeed, the first since Sept. 11, 2001.”

So what did this media meet and greet by the President represent? Most of the speculation revolved around electoral anxiety in the Bush camp, but there's another take,

The Columbia Journalism Review's Brian Montopoli writes, “Well, that's one question. Another is, “Could the normally closed-off reporters, trapped in the bubble that accompanies the traveling circus, be attaching a little too much importance to a break in their routine?”

“Trapped in the bubble” is the operative phrase here. But even that insight can and must go deeper. “Trapped in the template” might be more accurate or even “trapped in the narrative.”

Election coverage has a dynamic that goes largely unchanged year after year. Just like in the war coverage of Iraq, there is a “master narrative” driving the reporting.

It is widely assumed that our media operates outside the political system as a watchdog, a “fourth estate.” But like in the Iraq War in which CENTCOM commander Tommy Franks assigned the media a role in his war plan as “the fourth front, “ the role of the media has changed. A media war becomes a key component in winning the Pentagon's war.

Media today is an integral part of the political process as well, a key component in what I call our “Mediaocracy.”

After the 2000 election, I co-edited a book challenging the simplistic belief that George Bush and Bush alone “stole” the election. In “Hail to the Thief” (Innovation), I argued that we could only understand what happened in that election by understanding the role, function and performance of the media that covered it and miscovered it.

In January 2003, red-faced media executive admitted to a Congressional committee their election eve forecasts that influenced the outcome were deeply flawed.

So sorry!

I wrote then. “The counting and undercounting of the election ballots, the mistaken votes and bizarre “over votes” was a scandal seen around the world, Rarely seen and poorly covered in the media was another scandal within that scandal--the role played by the media itself.”

That scandal was not a crude conspiracy nor is it a simple accidental occurrence. Its roots can be found in the corporate media environment that has been changing for years as well as in the increasing corporatization of politics itself. It reflects a growing symbiotic relationship between increasingly interlocking media elites and political elites. Together they form a powerful interdependent system in which overt ideology and shared worldviews mask more covert subservience to corporate agendas. Together these two forces form a Mediaocracy a political system tethered to a media system

After every election, journalists do post-mortems acknowledging their own limits and mistakes. The honest ones admit that there was a uniformity of outlook, in which the horse race is over covered, and the issues under covered,

They concede that there was a focus on polls without explaining their limits adequately, or how polls in turn are affected by the volume and slant of media coverage. There were criticisms of how entertainment values infiltrated election coverage, what Time magazine calls “Electotainment.” They bemoan the fact that there was more spin and opinionizing than reporting investigative reporting.

Has this changed in election 2004 or is it more of the same? While others forecast the results, I can safely predict that these deeply institutionalized media failures will once again be acknowledged and decried in this year’s post-mortems.

You heard it here first in this “pre-mortem.”

INVESTIGATING THE FINANCIAL CRISIS

12. WHY SOME IDEAS ARE MORE VISIBLE THAN OTHERS

Towards the end of 2008, I was walking briskly to Wall Street with a crew to begin filming my documentary, *Plunder the Crime of Our Time* about financial crime. A sudden call of nature forced me to divert into a nearby Borders Book store with facilities.

As I was leaving, I ran into none other than former Federal Reserve Board Chairman Alan Greenspan who had just finished a book-signing event, and was on the way out.

My crew watched in amazement as I exited, almost hand in hand, in the company of one of the most powerful men in finance, the nation's biggest economist, then known as "The Maestro," who was surrounded by a coterie of book flacks and security men.

Unfortunately, our camera was not on to capture my spontaneous back and forth with the author of the pompous tome, "The Age of Turbulence" that was all over the media then with fawning interviews paying homage to the "genius" who ran the Fed from 1987 until 2006.

He was a right-wing political celebrity, known for mumbling, obfuscation and refusing to stop massive Subprime mortgage abuses, even when warned to do so by a Fed Governor.

To memorialize this unlikely occasion, I asked the "Chairman" to sign a dollar bill for me, a practice he had become known for, whatever its legality in a country with laws against defacing money. He happily accommodated, but it was actually a Federal Reserve note that he autographed, a currency that is backed by nothing, issued by a Reserve bank that is actually a private corporation controlled, not by the government, but the banking industry.

He soon had people in the street applauding at his presence. I often thought of that moment when I was back on Wall Street years later covering the Occupy movement. The Borders chain store we both visited had been shuttered because of all the unsustainable debt Wall Street firms shoveled into that company.

Greenspan's star, kept highly visible for years by the company he kept, including wife Andrea Mitchell, an NBC-TV correspondent and former girl friend, ABC News star Barbara Walters, fell after the financial meltdown. In 2006, one of his acolytes, Tim Geithner of the NY Fed, and later Obama's Treasury Secretary told him, "I'd like the record to show that I think you're pretty terrific, too."

Ugh!

Time Magazine later included Greenspan on the list of the 25 "geniuses" responsible for the financial crisis writing, "The maestro admitted in an October congressional hearing that he had "made a mistake in presuming" that financial firms could regulate themselves."

Greenspan's role in all this is well documented. Not as widely known was his service as a loyal member of the Ayn Rand cult that advocated a philosophy of "objectivism" that translated into aggressive opposition to all regulation and social safety nets, Medicare, Medicaid, even public schools and public hospitals.

His "mistake" was actually a core value in his belief system.

Writer (and illegal immigrant) Ayn Rand's paean to selfishness in books like *Atlas Shrugged* popularized the ideology that today drives the Tea Party, almost all of the GOP political candidates, and even the extreme austerity movement in Europe and parts of the USA.

It is the subject of financial journalist Gary Weiss brilliant new book, *Ayn Rand Nation*, that investigates the close political relationship between Greenspan and Rand. (Although Rand called him "the Undertaker" because of how he dressed.)

In those years, Greenspan even wrote a letter to the NY Times defending Rand's brilliance after the newspaper carried a denunciation by anti-communist stalwart Whitaker Chambers, who wrote dismissively, "Out of a lifetime of reading I can recall no other book in which a tone of overriding arrogance was so implacably sustained. Its shrillness is without reprieve. Its dogmatism is without appeal." Gore Vidal called her work, "nearly perfect in its immorality."

What interested me is why, despite this intellectual opposition on right and left, Greenspan and Rand both were given mostly a free ride in a mainstream media that glorified and promoted his financial acumen, and her work, labeled a “nightmare by a Time Reviewer---into bestseller status.

Neither had celebrity panache but both were elevated to positions of high respectability and deep gravitas.

Some answers can be found in another new book, Asset Manager Barry James’ Dyke’s self-published “The Pirates of Manhattan 2” that shows factually how closely our mass media is tied to the interests of Wall Street mutual funds.

In a chapter, Media Madness & Truth Decay, he not only shows the massive role that advertising by financial firms has on TV and newspapers where ads comprise 87% of revenue, but, also, how media executives pay themselves like bankers with outsized salaries and huge bonuses. He shows that this same pattern prevails in public broadcasting where shows like Nightly Business Report and National Public Radio’s Marketplace Money are, in effect, “pep rallies for Wall Street” funded by financial firms that also pay their elite managers high salaries.

But more telling is how media companies themselves are financed—a story rarely if ever investigated by the media outlets themselves. If they did, they would find high salaries being paid out of 401k retirement funds paid in by their own workers. They are, in effecting diverting the savings of the people who work for them into their own pockets.

Many of these companies are troubled financially themselves and serve the industry and its owners more than public. In page after page of charts and hard data, he lists key media companies with major ownership shares held by Wall Street’s Mutual Funds and institutional investors.

CBS	90%
Comcast (NBC)	83%
Walt Disney (ABC)	69%
McClatchy	95%
News Corp	86%
NY Times	65%
Washington Post	65%

(If you don't trust these figures, go to Yahoo's Finance site, plug in any company's name and click on ownership.)

Dyke contends these ownership patterns connect back to what we see, arguing, "CNBC cable programming format treats business news and the stock market like a football game with half-time reports, talking heads... and football like diagrams... The editorial tone is sympathetic to the Wall Street illuminati—traders, speculators, the nation's banks, mutual fund companies, hedge fund managers." etc. etc.

So, now you can see why some stories and personalities, some ideologies and ideas are more equal than others, often bathed in coverage while, more critical views, are usually ignored, or even suppressed.

There may be a free press in America but interests that can afford to advertise heavily in the media, or, better yet, own the media are always the most visible.

"Maestro" Greenspan whose own net worth soared to \$10 million on an \$180,000 annual salary may not have known how his philosophy could lead to a financial catastrophe, but he did understand how even an "undertaker" could be turned into a media celebrated cultural hero. It's also why the worst ideas often become the best known.

The "marketplace" of ideas is as manipulated as the others.

13. STRAUSS-KAHN AND WALL STREET'S AGGRESSIVE CULTURE OF SEXUALITY

My colleague Mike Whitney asks: “So, what are the chances that the former International Monetary Fund Director, Dominique Strauss-Kahn will get a fair trial now that he’s been blasted as a serial sex offender in about 3,000 articles and in all the televised news reports?”

Do you remember any Wall Street bankers being dragged off in handcuffs when they blew up the financial system and bilked people out of trillions of dollars?”

The answer to both questions is certainly Non in French or No in English, but there’s more to the connection between Sex and Wall Street. Without commenting on the evidence in this case, which has been asserted, not proven, there is a deeper context that is being ignored.

I call it the Testosterone Factor in *The Crime of Our Time*, my book about how Wall Street criminally engineered the financial crisis.

Interesting isn’t it that have been so few references to the link between the pervasiveness of salacious sex and the highly-charged life of a class of “entitled” wealthy bankers who live off of others with few rules or restraints.

There is also often no news about that or the practices of the IMF, which is often accused of raping poor and vulnerable countries with unfair structural adjustment programs. The IMF chief is now experiencing what many in France feel is an unfair “personal adjustment program” at the hands of the New York cops and courts.

Odd isn’t it that there have been so few references in the coverage also to Eliot Spitzer, the one-time “Sheriff” of Wall Street who was denouncing criminal financial practices by the Bush Administration when he was brought down in a sex scandal.

Strauss-Kahn had also been in the news lately as a possible Socialist presidential candidate to topple our pal Sarkozy in France as well as a critic of US banking practices. He recently outraged official Washington by

asserting that the Chinese economy was surpassing ours.

In both cases, powerful forces have motives to bring down such potential reformers, but, it is also true, that in each case, these men themselves were, on the surface anyway, sexually obsessed and prone to illegal behavior that put them—and others—at risk.

Both are Alpha Males known for pushing envelopes of personal responsibility. Both were known for personal arrogance and living in highly secretive sexualized personal cultures. Writer Tristan Banon claimed she had to fight DSK off in an earlier incident, calling him a “strutting chimpanzee.”

Bear in mind also that part of what intelligence agencies do these days in targeting people is to prepare sophisticated psychological profiles before they intervene. They know that the knowledge of the secret lives—and kinks -- of public figures can easily discredit them. They specialize in foraging for dirt and can leak information or use it opportunistically.

Remember Richard Nixon’s authorized break-in at the office of Daniel Ellsberg’s psychiatrist pursuing highly personal information?

Nothing is off-limits as people like former weapons inspector Scott Ritter learned as well when he became embroiled in a mini-sex caper.

When people are highly stressed, they are prone to making mistakes. The agencies shadowing them know that, and from time to time encourage it or just wait for the opportunity to help them bring themselves down.

What needs to be examined is how the crimes of the rich and powerful are treated. Bush’s bombing or Geithner’s tax maneuvers were ignored.

But when sex is involved, all bets are off. Sex scandals have become a staple of media exploitation with personal morality plays trumping political morality confrontations every time.

They are both great distractions and effective tools of character assassination, which are often more effective than more violent ways to neutralize people considered dangerous...

That’s why the FBI was so hot to discredit Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. with

leaks of so-called wiretapped sex tapes. In his case, this tactic failed but the other worked.

In some cases both tactics are deployed as in the physical assassination of Bin Laden and then the character-killing aftermath aimed at his supporters through the release of porn allegedly found in his “lair.”

Intense sexual appetites are an extension of the “culture” of an avaricious financial world. Illegal sex and Wall Street (or in La Defense, France’s financial district) has long been linked, writes Heidi Moore: “This is all a reminder that the financial district hasn’t always been gleaming skyscrapers and Starbucks.

Consider this passage from *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920*:

“Adjacent to the Wall Street business district, prostitutes worked in saloons along Greenwich Street, taking men upstairs. In addition, immediately south of Wall Street was the Battery Tender- loin, on Whitehall Street. The Water Street area, however, remained the most significant and poorest waterfront zone of prostitution. Amid the rookeries, rat pits and dance halls, prostitutes exposed in each window to the public view plied their trade.”

In the modern era, many of the street’s most macho traders are, according to David Russell who worked in the industry for two decades, known as “swinging dicks.” It is well known that the big money in Wall Street has kept a vibrant, upscale sex industry alive and well. There has been one scandal after another. Here are a few cases cited by Moore before Spitzer’s demise:

- BP Chief Executive John Browne left both his post at the oil company and his directorship at Goldman Sachs Group last year after it was revealed that Lord Browne had lied to a court about his young male lover, whom he had met through an escort-service Web site.
- A group of six women sued Dresdner Kleinwort in 2006 for \$1.4 billion on allegations that male executives entertained clients at strip clubs and even brought prostitutes back to the office. The case was settled out of court in 2007.
- Canadian hedge fund manager Paul Eustace in 2007, by his own admission

in a deposition filed in court lied to investors and cheated on his wife with a stripper.

- In 1987, Peter Detwiler, vice chairman of E.F. Hutton & Co., was, according to court testimony, instructed by his client, Tesoro Petroleum Corp. Chairman Robert V. West, to hire a blonde prostitute for the finance minister of Trinidad & Tobago, which had been supporting a tax issue that would have hurt Tesoro's profits.

- A woman claiming to have been Bernard Madoff's mistress published a book about their secret liaisons. Earlier, his secretary said he had a fondness for massages in an article in Vanity Fair.

Wall Street's fall is said to have brought down the sex industry almost as if it had been a fully owned subsidiary, if not an extension, of the financial services business.

To find out more, I spoke to Jonathan Albert, a psychologist practicing in mid-Manhattan.

He told me, "I see a lot of clients in NYC who are impacted by the economic crisis. People deal with stress in many different ways. Some people exercise, some people over-eat, some use drugs and alcohol, some even sexualize those feelings."

"Sexualize?" I asked him, how do they sexualize these feelings? His response, "I've seen a lot of Wall Streeters who sexualize feelings of anxiety and stress and depression. So for example they might rely on adult sexual services to deal with those feelings."

Loretta Napoleoni, an Italian author, who worked on Wall Street for years, offers a provocative thesis for how the need for paid sex "on the wild side" became part of the culture of irresponsibility.

"I can tell you that this is absolutely true because being a woman, having worked in finance 20 years ago I could tell you that even at that time – when the market was not going up so much – these guys, all they talk is sex."

She complemented her personal experience by citing a study by researchers from Oxford University.

“The study discovered that an excessive production of testosterone, in a period of fantastic financial exuberance, creates a sort of confusion. It is what people in sports call ‘being in the zone,’ which means you get in a certain situation where you feel that you will always win. That you are infallible.”

I asked Dr. Albert if that finding may have indeed had relevance to Spitzer or be endemic in the industry? His reply, “I do see this lot in the finance industry, yes, people in positions of power often feel as if they can perhaps get away with it. There is sometimes a sense of entitlement.”

“They feel entitled to take part in risky behavior?” I pressed.

“High-risk behavior. It’s similar to what they do on a daily basis. They invest millions and millions of dollars and there is a great risk involved with that. The same is true with using the services of a prostitute. Obviously, there are great health risks; their relationship is in great danger if they are using the services of a prostitute.”

“A lot of people skate on the excitement, on that euphoric rush.”

The culture of risk on Wall Street was intoxicating to many in the same way that gamblers become addicted or report a rush when they are winning.

The euphoria of life in the fast lane often implodes when one’s luck runs out leading to depression and family breakups. One remedy is going to self-help groups like “The ‘Wall Street Wives Club’ formed to empower and serve the needs of wives and girlfriends whose husbands or significant others work in the stressful and volatile brokerage community.

Men are often uncomfortable expressing their feelings.”

Some of Dr. Albert’s clients coped with the pressures on them to perform in kinkier ways.

“They just want to let loose, relax and take a very passive role in their sexual practice. So they may seek out the services of a dominatrix, where they are at the mercy of this sex worker. I’ve had clients who seek out services where they get whipped, cuffed, put on a leash like a dog.”

Beating others can also be part of this culture. There is violence lurking to

the surface that can easily erupt when desires are denied.

I am not being moralistic here, but a climate of narcissism and living secret lives often desensitizes its practitioners leaving them little time to think of how their actions may affect others. (Or how the policies they promote impact on their customers or the poor!)

None of this context excuses anything that Strauss-Kahn may or may not have done, but what it does do is shine some light on a culture of aggressive power-driven hyper-sexuality that our media is often too hypocritical to investigate.

14. THE PONZI SCHEME IS BIGGER THAN WE KNOW

While Bernard Madoff languishes in jail, bankers continue to profit and the poor lose their homes and hope. Thank you, Bernie, for breaking your silence — even if you are still clinging to that cover-up mode you adopted since you took the entirety of the blame for your crimes.’

What is clear is that ripping off the rich is punished far more severely than ripping off the poor. The lengthy sentence you were given spared countless other unscrupulous businessmen from facing the music — whatever music there is.

In an interview — with a reporter from The New York Times who is writing a book to cash in on a man who has already cashed out — we learn, in the vaguest terms, that Madoff believes the banks he did his crooked business with “should have known” his figures did not figure. Keeping with the deceit that has served him well over the years, he names no names.

For years, he went undetected by business journalists, who knew — or should have known — what he was up to. There are even questions about the speed with which he was sentenced, preventing him from being tried — a process, which, through diligent cross-examination, would have brought us, more information on the details of his dirty deals.

Madoff is still not coming clean about the web of alliances he had established internationally, as well as in New York. As a result, people investigating him are making a small fortune. The Financial Times said, “The army of lawyers and consultants helping to recover funds from Bernard Madoff’s \$19.6-billion fraud stand to earn more than \$1.3 billion in fees, according to new figures that detail the cost of liquidating the huge Ponzi scheme.”

The comments of readers to The Times appear to be more insightful than the paper’s reports. Here is one from Texas: “I actually, sort of, feel sorry for this man. He was just doing what many investment firms were doing at the same time. He has been imprisoned as a scapegoat, yet many people since then — and to this day — are doing the same thing. Where are the indictments against the thousands of other people who did the same thing — and knowingly led this country into financial disaster?”

The best reporting on the subject is not in the mainstream press but in a music magazine, *Rolling Stone*, in which Matt Taibbi investigates why the whole of Wall Street is not in jail. “Financial crooks brought down the world’s economy — but the feds (federal officials) are doing more to protect them than to prosecute them,” Taibbi charges.

By their actions, Democrats and Republicans both appear to prefer the most simplistic understandings — or misunderstandings.

The Financial Crisis Inquiry Commission, like the 9/11 and Warren Commissions before it avoided key issues. The inquiry commission did not call for a criminal indictment of wrongdoers. While informative, its report was ultimately a dud — telling us mostly what we knew, although there were some disclosures that our tepid press still missed.

Now the Republicans want to water down the regulations on derivatives in the Dodd-Frank financial “reform” legislation, claiming they will lead to a loss of jobs. This is predictable: Every effort to defend big business is always couched in terms of helping the public.

The *New York Times* reported, “Representative Stephen Lynch, Democrat of Massachusetts, warned: ‘You think regulation is costly? How about the \$7 trillion we just lost from not regulating the derivatives markets?’” There was no response from his colleagues. So who will do something about it?

The political right prefers to change the subject, while the left does not seem to have the time or energy to make economic justice its principal concern — even as polls show the economy is the number one problem for most people in the US.

Progressives should hang their heads in shame at the minimal amount of activism taking place against the banks and the escalating numbers of foreclosures. Homes and hope are being stolen from people for whom the term “depression” now has a personal, as well as economic, meaning.

The other day, economist Jeff Sachs — who has a lot of atoning to do for his own misguided, destructive economic advice to Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union — warned that little is being done about economic inequity and the growing ranks of the poor in the US. He asked if people who run things in the US want “another Egypt”. He is a policy wonk, not an activist — and is likely to fear the idea.

Many activists say they want to emulate the Egyptians, but who will organize anything as effective — even in a land that used to be known for people’s movements — to raise hell? In Egypt, young people used the Internet to organize and mobilize for change. In the US, the Internet seems to function more as an escape valve, consuming hours of our time and giving us another way to talk to each other. Social media here seems to be more for socializing.

The US government supports Internet freedom abroad — but restricts it and spies on it at home. US President Barack Obama has already supported a law allowing him to shut it down here in a national emergency.

The passivity of the public is one result of the inundation by middle-of-the-road media and effective information deprivation.

As the philosopher and political activist Noam Chomsky puts it, “The population in the United States is angry, frustrated and full of fear and irrational hatreds. And the folks not far from you on Wall Street are just doing fine. They’re the ones who created the current crisis. They’re the ones who were called upon to deal with it. They’re coming out stronger and richer than ever. But everything’s fine — as long as the population is passive.”

That is our problem, Bernie. Even if the people want to know, it is not that easy to find out. Let us thank the media and our government for that.

15. AS THE FEDS BROADEN A MORTGAGE FRAUD PROBE, WILL WHITE-COLLAR PERPS EVER DO TIME FOR THEIR SUBPRIME CRIMES?

New York, May 6: There is a time in the life of every writer when you find yourself fearing that you have become a robo call phone machine---repeating the same message over and over and with diminishing results,

That's how I felt after 8 months of silence after calling the credit crisis a "subcrime" scandal, lashing out at the fraudulent activity at its core and calling for the investigation and prosecution of wrong doers. Almost no media outlets accepted this way of framing the problem although, as usual, the British press was ahead of its American cousins in putting the blame on the bankers, not the borrowers.

When the FBI announced a probe of 14 mortgage companies, I thought that finally some investigators were on the case. But then, word leaked that they were only going after small fish even as big banks reported losses in the billions.

Bank robberies should be up their alley: after all, this is a bank heist case, perhaps one of the biggest in history, only it has been the banks that were doing the heisting.

The New York Times reported May 5th that a new criminal investigation was finally underway.

A G-Man explained anonymously: "The latest inquiry is broader and deeper...This is a look at the mortgage industry across the board, and it has gotten a lot more momentum in recent weeks because of the banks' earnings shortfall."

At last, institutional fraud may be on the agenda. At last, deeper questions are being asked. There have been some Congressional hearings but so far, none have risen to a Watergate type level prompting in-depth investigations fueled with subpoenas.

Slowly, oh so slowly, news outlets are recognizing this is a big crime story, one they missed for years, or at least since 2002 when subprime securities

started being packaged for sale.

Reports the Washington Independent:

“As loans made to borrowers with decent credit begin to fail at a surprisingly rapid rate, it’s becoming clear that widespread fraud helped support the entire mortgage system - from borrowers who lied on their loans, to brokers who encouraged it, to lenders who misled some low income borrowers, to the many lenders, investors and ratings agencies that conveniently and deliberately looked the other way as profits rolled in.

Despite its widespread role, fraud hasn’t yet been at the forefront of proposed rescue plans, which center on refinancing people out of loans now resetting to higher rates.”

Why would reputable bankers and respected investment houses engage in these dishonest activities? The short answer: money, and lots of it.

Sales from Collateralized Debt Obligations (CDO’s) jumped from \$157 billion in 2004 to \$559 billion in 2006 according to a study for the North Star Fund by Kevin Connor. Ten investment banks in all were underwriters for 70% of some \$486 billion in securitizations in 2006. The banks had a motto: “It’s all about capital.”

Subprime-related securities produced large multi-million dollar bonuses for traders and executives as well as high revenues for the firms. In the years when business was booming CEOs at big firms were making \$10 to \$50 million annually apiece. Collectively, in 2006, a year before their fall the big banks earned a stunning \$130 billion.

Even after these practices came to light, hefty bonuses continued. Wall Streeters walked away with \$31 billion at the end of 2007, only one billion less than the year before. Executives who were fired still received multi-million dollar payoffs.

Most media outlets considered this business as usual, not shocking or illegal.

Not even when some of these loans were called “liars loans” in the industry as in when loan originators colluded with or advised borrowers on how to

lie on their applications. It was all done with a wink and a nod reported the Washington Independent that interviewed many insiders and experts who contended that:

“.....pervasive fraud was, indeed, a problem - on the lender’s side. At the peak of the housing boom, they say, the nation’s mortgage system was set up to promote and encourage outright fraud in order to close a loan - and everyone, from brokers to loan officers to Wall Street, looked the other way. Borrowers also were put into products like payment-option arms that were unsuitable - and lenders knew it. “They were pushed like Vioxx, with very little regard for their dangers,” said Kathleen Keest, senior policy counsel with the Center for Responsible Lending, a research group that investigates predatory lending.

Wall Street was not a passive player either because of all the money they made from subprime transactions. In some cases, they paid more for loans with predatory characteristics. Loan originators at the local level—as sleazy as many were—reported that it was the Wall Street firms that dictated the types of loans they wanted and their underwriting criteria. Thus, the so-called “secondary market” was really in charge.

This is why others and I insist this was a Wall Street crime wave built around predatory practices. The people who had the most were deeply complicit in ripping off the people who had the least. What’s worse, they had no legal liability in these unscrupulous deals.

How did America’s leading business magazine respond after the credit crisis brought Wall Street to its knees? FORTUNE called the credit crisis “both totally shocking and utterly predictable.” For them it was shocking not because of the human devastation or the millions of families who were cheated and faced foreclosure or because of the rippling effects on our society, but because the “best minds in the business...managed to lose tens of billions.”

And “predictable?” Again, not due to the lack of regulation or the enabling of shoddy products by our government but “because whether its junk bonds or tech stocks or emerging-market debt, Wall Street always rides a wave until it crashes.” What a contrast to the usual celebratory coverage, but also what a cop-out to explain it all away.

Warren Buffet, perhaps America's most successful investor, sounded disgusted:

“Wall Street is going to go where the money is and not worry about consequences, Wall Street is reaping what they've sown,” he shrugs. ``Said his vice chairman, “If this was an Alice in Wonderland fable, you'd say it's too extreme. It wouldn't work as satire. Adults are not going to behave this way.”

But adults did—and continue to. So far, they have been well rewarded as well. The question is: what are the rest of us, and our prosecutors going to do about it?

JOURNALISM

16. UNDERSTANDING MEDIA ETHICS IS IMPORTANT, CHANGING MEDIA PRACTICE IS ESSENTIAL

Why bother to learn about the media? What's the point of analyzing its power or measuring its impact? Is there a deeper rationale for doing the studies many of us take on to show how broadcasting and the press limit the discourse, muddle our understanding, and set the political agenda?

Media ethics have traditionally been offered up as a way to insure high standards in the media and to elevate the quality of our media discourse. There are books on the subjects, guidelines for individuals and debates about what should or does constitute ethical conduct. Most of this is directed at individuals. Media scandals tend to occur when these standards, especially bars on plagiarism and "making it up" are violated. Always concerned with its credibility and appearance, the media industry is vigilant about enforcing ethical codes, especially after high profile incidents such as the ones that occurred at the New York Times and USA today involving individual reporters.

The problem is that ethics cannot just be reduced to individual malpractice. They have to be situated in institutional settings in which the role and performance of the institution has to be assessed, not only in terms of the accuracy or balance in individual stories but the larger social impact of media outlets. We need an ethical media—not just lip service paid to ethics in the media. As a journalist who has worked in print, radio, TV, network news, cable programming and websites my approach is broader, raising deeper questions about the function and performance of the media itself. Bear in mind the admonition of the writer Thomas Pynchon in his book *Gravity's Rainbow*: "If they can get you asking the wrong questions, they don't have to worry about the answers."

TOWARDS AN ETHICAL MEDIA

In an age in which media bashing seems second in popularity only to media watching, we need to consider what it will take to make an ethical advocacy media more of a priority for those who despair at our political environment and cringe at the incompleteness and spin of so much of the news we see and hear.

I write during a political year when campaigning and political debates have aroused public interest as never before. And never before has the role of media companies been more omnipresent in our politics. Debates, which were once held by ostensibly non-partisan political groups, are now sponsored by networks and newspapers that appear disinterested and above the fray but often have undisclosed interests or agendas. Seldom is there any scrutiny of their own political agendas, lobbying efforts, or political donations.

At the same time, critics of the media tend to focus only on the worst excesses of those they oppose—and not the system itself. The left denounces the Fox News Channel often with self-righteous putdowns that do not ask how Fox has become as successful as it has. At the same time, many of the right continue to campaign as if by rote against so-called liberal media bias.

THE MYTH OF THE FOURTH ESTATE

The myth of the media as fourth estate is still with us despite the fact that our political system remains compromised by a campaign finance scandal in which the media is totally complicit. All political candidates spend most of their time raising money for political ads that go directly into the coffers of media companies.

The Pentagon's plan for fighting the Iraq War spoke of the media as "The fourth front," not an autonomous fourth estate. Military planners used information warfare techniques to control its spin. David Miller, editor of an important new book called "Tell Me Lies" (Pluto) explains:

As Col Kenneth Allard has written, the 2003 attack on Iraq 'will be remembered as a conflict in which information fully took its place as a weapon of war.' The interoperability of the various types of 'weaponized information' has far reaching, if little noticed, implications for the integration of propaganda and media institutions into the war machine. The experience of Iraq in 2003 shows how the planned integration of the media into instruments of war fighting is developing. It also shows the increased role for the private sector in information dominance, a role that reflects wider changes in the armed services in the US and the UK.

Information dominance provides the underpinning rationale for all information related work. As applied to traditional media management

activities the key to dominance is that ‘nothing done makes any difference’. In practice this means that the US and UK can tolerate dissent in the media and alternative accounts on the internet. Dissent only matters if it interferes with their plans.

We were held hostage by a multi-channel confidence game driven by breaking news, armchair generals, embedded reporters, endless government “briefings, sanitized pictures, murdered journalists, distorted history, inaccurate information, hyped updates, -- all part of a non-stop flow of fast-paced “mili-tainment”.

It signaled for many in the heart of what was once a profession, but is now a business, that we have entered the final days, not of the world---no, the messiah is not returning--- but of TV news, and even journalism itself, in this age of ever consolidating media merges and purges.

This merger between the military and the media has ushered in a new era of newspeak and perception management. It raised broad ethical questions about the role of media and its importance.

PR people used to focus on getting the word out; perception managers seek to engineer how it is processed and understood. The correspondent as publicist and lap dog has supplanted the reporter as truth seeker and watchdog. In the old days, we demanded more investigative journalism. Now our demand must become Investigate Journalism.

As a journalist, I am doing my own investigation with a new film called WMD, Weapons of Mass Deception. I am looking into the relationship of network lobbying of the FCC for beneficial rule change and the uncritical approach that network news took to covering the invasion of Iraq. Before the war in Iraq began, American media companies began lobbying the FCC for rule changes that would benefit their bottom lines. There was a question raised: Did the FCC agree to waive the rules if the media companies agreed to wave the flag? Here are some comments from people I interviewed:

JIHAD AL KHAZEN, top Arab journalist

“We’ve been in this business long enough to be very careful. But I’m sure they were working for a deal and were hoping that being supportive of the war would get them a deal. Remember what Rupert Murdoch did when

he was in China? He was the only one defending China, despite all the abuses of human rights, because he was working on a TV deal, which he eventually got in China.”

NICHOLAS JOHNSON, former FCC Commissioner

“The power generally, not just media power, power tends to go with power. Primarily they want to support whoever is in the White House, they want to support government, and they want to support other large corporate interests. They don’t want to rock the boat, generally.”

MAURICE HINCHEY, NY CONGRESSMAN

“This is not something that happened yesterday or overnight. It has been going on here in the United States for about 2 decades at least. It has been process, organized, concerted, thought out, well planned, and well executed process, going on back to the Reagan administration, flowing through the first Bush administration and now being picked up successfully so far by second Bush administration. ... This is a plan, it’s not serendipitous, it doesn’t happen accidentally, it’s what they want. They want to be able to control the political discussion.”

JOHN STAUBER. PR WATCH

“Who was the FCC commissioner with whom they were trying to curry favor, who was acting on their behalf during this period, it was Michael Powell, the son of Colin Powell... it becomes sort of a, you scratch my back, I scratch your back.”

RALPH NADER

“Chairman Michael Powell justifies media consolidation on the grounds that 1) it can bail out some failing newspapers or B) it takes a lot of expenses to send those crews over to Iraq and cover the war. That is the most specious rationalization I have heard by an FCC Commissioner.”

MICHAEL WOLFF, Media Analyst

“I think it’s very clear that the major media companies in this country had business before the government. Boom, it’s a conflict of interest.”

MEDIAOCRACY

We live in an age of media politics, governed not just by politicians but by what is in effect a “media-ocracy” a mutually dependent and interactive relationship between major media and politics, a nexus of power in which political leaders use media exposure to shape opinions and drive policy while media outlets use politicians to confer legitimization and offer what TIME magazine called “Electotainment.”

Political candidates increasingly rely on their media advisors and spend small fortunes to buy airtime to broadcast ads to get poll-tested messages across. Governments don’t have to buy time but their media operations have even bigger budgets to hire small armies of strategists and speechwriters, spin doctors and PR specialists. This media-ocracy then sets the agenda and frames what issues get the focus, and which do not.

Media has become the fulcrum of political life throughout the West and the driver of economic life as well. Commercials excite demand. TV Celebrities become commodities. Marketing strategies that sell products and programs focused on markets also sell ideology. The ups and downs of share prices get more attention than the rate of unemployment or indices of social misery. Young people spend more time in the living room than in the classroom. Many scholars believe that television has become their principal teacher. Some Critics call TV a “plug in drug.”

U.S. media, given Constitutional sanction by the U.S. Constitution under the First Amendment now often degrades democracy, promoting the business system over the culture of civil society. The biggest business it boosts is itself, as media companies become billion dollar businesses thanks to mergers and acquisitions. This has led to unprecedented consolidation and concentration of ownership in fewer and fewer hands.

As commercial media expands, infiltrating into every corner of life, public service media clones its formulas for survival joining in the dumbing down of content and loosening of public interest standards. Bottom line pressures impact on every side as competition leads to splintering of the audience into smaller and smaller, demographically designed niches. At the same time, larger economic problems limit state subsidies and advertising revenues.

One problem is that many prominent political leaders don’t recognize that

the media problem is at the heart of the political crisis in America. The Democratic leader Al Gore had avoided discussing the role of the media during his failed bid for the Presidency in 2000. Two years later and just before he decided to drop out of politics, he finally spoke out. It was as if he had finally seen the power of a media system that Marshall McLuhan once called “transparently invisible.” In an interview with the New York Observer, Gore pointed to an institutional imbalance in the media system that tilts in favor of conservatives and conservative values, According to writer Josh Benson:

“Mr. Gore has a bone to pick with his critics: namely, he says, that a systematically orchestrated bias in the media makes it impossible for him and his fellow Democrats to get a fair shake.” Something will start at the Republican National Committee, inside the building, and it will explode the next day on the right-wing talk-show network and on Fox News and in the newspapers that play this game, The Washington Times and the others. And then, they’ll create a little echo chamber, and soon they’ll start baiting the mainstream media for allegedly ignoring the story they’ve pushed into the zeitgeist. And then pretty soon the mainstream media goes out and disingenuously takes a so-called objective sampling, and lo and behold, these R.N.C. talking points are woven into the fabric of the zeitgeist.”

Moreover, during a lengthy discourse on the history of political journalism in America, Mr. Gore said he believed that evolving technologies and market forces have combined to lower the media’s standards of objectivity.

The introduction of cable-television news and Internet news made news a commodity, available from an unlimited number of sellers at a steadily decreasing cost, so the established news organizations became the high-cost producers of a low-cost commodity,” said Mr. Gore. “They’re selling a hybrid product now that’s news plus news-helper; whether it’s entertainment or attitude or news that’s marbled with opinion, it’s different. Now, especially in the cable-TV market, it has become good economics once again to go back to a party-oriented approach to attract a hard-core following that appreciates the predictability of a right-wing point of view, but then to make aggressive and constant efforts to deny that’s what they’re doing in order to avoid offending the broader audience that mass advertisers want. Thus the Fox slogan ‘We Report, You Decide,’ or whatever the current version of their ritual denial is.

IS THE MEDIA THE SOLUTION OR THE PROBLEM?

In 2000, the bipartisan Alliance for Better Campaigns (Jimmy Carter & Jerry Ford, Chairs) issued a detailed report showing how local TV stations violated federal law by overcharging candidates and then packaged their ads into blocks that made them unwatchable. This media profiteering was never even reported or, much less, investigated and prosecuted.

Back in the turbulent sixties, activists used to say, “you’re either part of the problem or part of the solution.” To many, the expectation remains that our media system is part of the solution, a watchdog on power, a check on corrupt government practices and corporate abuses. Politicians scramble to get on the media, while activists crave their ten seconds of fame as a sound bite in some news story. As the media tilts right in an atmosphere of intensifying media concentration, little focus is paid to how media has become a giant problem, rather than just a constant complaint.

Complaints tend to be ventilated about while some problems demand to be addressed. This is not to say that no one has or is addressing them. Media Historian Robert McChesney’s latest book is called *The Problem of the Media*. He is one of the few academics who promotes and organizes a media reform movement. In his view, “The symptoms of the crisis of the U.S. media are well-known—a decline in hard news, the growth of info-tainment and advertorials, staff cuts and concentration of ownership, increasing conformity of viewpoint and suppression of genuine debate. “ His book deals with issues such as the declining quality of journalism, the question of bias, the weakness of the public broadcasting sector, and the state of media studies as an academic discipline, and the limits and possibilities of anti-trust legislation in regulating the media. “It points out the ways in which the existing media system has become a threat to democracy, and shows how it could be made to serve the interests of the majority.”

There is no question that the public is open to, if not totally supportive of, media reform. A Pew Poll some years back found that 70% of the American public was dissatisfied with the media, for a range of reasons and that 70% of people who work in the media shared that dissatisfaction. When Lou Dobbs asked his CNN audience in late 2003 if “big media companies should be broken up,” 5000 people responded and a whopping 96% agreed.

Nearly three million Americans wrote to Congress and the FCC to protest

new rule changes that would place media ownership in fewer hands. Several political candidates also addressed the issue. Media coverage of the Dean campaign turned negative after Governor Dean took up the issue. “Who woulda thunk?” that this issue would arouse as much interest as it did?” commented the Washington Post’s media watcher Howard Kurtz who showed a stunning personal disconnect about public attitudes on one of the key issues he writes about. “Not me” he added. He characterized the public outrage as a revolution. Media had suddenly gone from being a complaint to being an issue.

The problem was that the FCC campaign was reactive and single-issue oriented. The public had the power to raise the issue, even put it on the agenda but not to mobilize enough political clout to win more than a compromise and a victory for the status quo. Ultimately, media owners prevailed with incremental gains and the larger issues of who will control broadband and cable were not even raised. The rage and discontent that fueled the massive letter writing campaigns soon moved back on to the safer and more familiar ground of personality dominated electoral politics.

Some candidates did raise it. Ohio Congressman made it central to his campaign but soon his campaign itself was no longer being covered. When Vermont Governor Howard Dean lashed out at media companies, media criticism of his campaign that had been touted as the front-runner sharpened. Dean quickly went from being a political wonder boy to a wannabe. Was it his media stance? Not surprisingly, the media never discussed the possibility. Media as an issue moved into the background.

MEDIA MANAGEMENT

On the right, the focus of the Administration remains on using the media with an artfully calculated, well focused and audience tested approach. No detail on how to shape and present a message goes unattended. PR firms like Luntz Research specialize in how to tailor issues for media and political consumption. Owner Frank Luntz takes credit for coming up with buzz words like “Contract With America,” “Partial Birth Abortion,” “The Marriage Tax,” and “The Death Tax.” They have a way with words because they understand the importance of words in framing the way the media covers stories and people understand them. They say they “revolutionized” political research and communication in America because they “specialize in language.” “We alone,” they boast, while differentiating themselves from

other PR firms, “offer numbers strategic direction and the actual words and phrases that have literally changed history....others may have more clients. But (we) are counseling a movement.”

The Administration puts its own media research to practical use in preparing its officials for media appearances. Thanks to a document released by former Treasury Secretary Paul O’Neil to journalist Ron Susskind in the course of preparing the book, *The Price of Loyalty*, the public learned just how the public could be manipulated on popular TV interview programs. Buskin’s website posted a document by O’Neill’s press secretary, Michele Davis. The memo advised the Treasury Secretary on how to spin and avoid hostile questions. Here’s part of what is said, and shows us how politicians are prepped to use the media to advantage:

“No matter what the question: We must act to ensure our economy recovers and put people back to work.”

KEY LINES TO DELIVER

“An economic security package will make the recession shorter and put people back to work faster.”

“Creating jobs is the key to success...”

WORD CHOICES

“Economic security, not stimulus”

“Talk about people and their jobs, not growth and surplus.”

There follows a reference to what O’Neill’s TONE should be as well as an admonition. “You need to interject the President’s message,” Davis coached O’Neill, “even if the question has nothing to do with that.”

If conservatives are adept at using media to selling their ideas, liberal politicians tend to be vaguer and more responsive to questioners as if their interrogators are sincere in wanting responses. The whole Q&A format tends to simplify issues and result in incomplete responses. The truth is that show biz has merged with news biz with little real scrutiny of the issues and their formulations.

THE LEFT DISTRUSTS BUT RARELY COMPETES

On the left, there is more distrust and dislike of the media, but not necessarily any agreement on what can be done to challenge and confront it. Many on the left look at Rupert Murdoch's Fox News Channel as if its coverage is totally unique and much worse than the channels it competes with. They focus on the excesses of commentators like Bill O'Reilly but not the packaging and attitude that resonate with many viewers because it appears to be more independent and outspoken. Activists groups like MoveOn.org and others focus on challenging government power as if it has more power than the corporate sector whose interests it serves. They do not promote campaigns to challenge the media, perhaps because they fear that criticizing the media may lead to less access to the media.

MEDIA FOR DEMOCRACY

The Mediachannel.org that I created believes we can do both—lobby on electoral issues and media issues at the same time. We are trying to galvanize public interest on media coverage of elections because the coverage is so crucial to their outcomes. We set up Media for Democracy 2004, a non-partisan citizens' initiative to monitor mainstream news coverage of the 2004 elections and advocate standards of reporting that are more democratic and issues-oriented. Media for Democracy educates and activates a growing base of concerned citizens by delivering alerts -- breaking news and analysis of mainstream media election coverage. Our goal is to build a constituency of people across the political spectrum that can put news executives on notice when their reporting strays from best practices for fair media coverage of elections.

We also monitor campaign coverage, reporting on work by groups like Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting and the Tyndall Report that monitors US network coverage. Media Tenor, an international organization does a weekly summary for us on media coverage of campaigns.

Members of the campaign are encouraged to write to media outlets. Here is an example of one of our initiatives Media for Democracy members have asked executives at several of America's largest news organizations to provide us with a better understanding of the ways they respond to a smear campaign when it comes across their news desks.

We refer not only to the most recent allegation of an affair between Senator John Kerry and an intern, which appeared mid-February on Matt Drudge's website, but also to other rumors, photographs and "gotcha" news items that originate from politically biased sources. Media for Democracy members are concerned over the apparent ease with which rumors migrate up the media food chain and spread into mainstream news coverage.

This request has been taken seriously by news executives. Here are the responses we received as of March 2004:

USA Today Executive Editor Brian Gallagher:

"We have no plans to report rumors now [or] in the future. We have no more enthusiasm for another sex scandal than the public does. On the other hand, we also will not censor political news or facts, and we would like to help people separate fact from rumor when we can do so responsibly."

Washington Post Editor Leonard Downie:

"We do not publish an allegation of this kind unless our own reporting determines that it is both true and relevant to the public actions of a public figure. We have not published many, many similar rumors and allegations made in past campaigns, mostly because our reporting determined that they were not true, even though some of them were published or broadcast elsewhere."

Boston Globe Editor Martin Baron:

"The Boston Globe withholds publication of rumors about public figures, including political candidates and public officials, unless it can verify them and determine that they are relevant. If a public figure chooses to publicly address rumors, we may report on those statements, giving them the level of prominence that seems appropriate to the circumstances. If the rumors remain unverified, such statements by a public figure are not likely to receive much prominence. The Globe frequently refrains from publishing rumors because our standards are not met."

Lexington Herald-Leader

Managing Editor W. Thomas Eblen:

"The Lexington Herald-Leader does not publish rumors. In fact, our standards for attribution are higher than at most newspapers. All information and quotes in staff-written stories must be attributed to named sources .

. . . While this practice occasionally costs us a scoop we can't get on the record, I'm sure it saves us from errors at least as often. We do sometimes publish wire stories containing unnamed sources; because of the way Washington works, that's often unavoidable. Even then, we are judicious. We are especially wary of stories like the Kerry rumor that are likely to be politically motivated . . . We didn't publish anything about the Kerry rumor until the young woman went public to deny it. Then, it was a short item inside the paper."

Austin American-Statesman
Managing Editor Fred Zipp:

"We publish facts or, occasionally, credible allegations that get to the heart of a candidate's or officeholder's ability to do the job and maintain the public's trust. We don't publish rumors, and we're reluctant to delve into a public figure's private life."

Palm Beach Post
Managing Editor John Bartosek:

"The Internet circulates a thousand rumors, with more every day, about the famous, near-famous and infamous. The Post rarely reports any of them. We publish stories that have facts in them, based on statements and records. One good example: When the White House released records of Bush's military service and discussed his time in the National Guard, then we had statements and records. That's when it reached the front page, and not before."

Toledo Blade Executive Editor Ron Royhab:

"We do not print rumors, period, whether they are sourced or not. We are in the news business, not the rumor business. We would not and did not pick up the rumor on Matt Drudge's website alleging that Senator Kerry had an affair with an intern. However, when Kerry was asked publicly about the allegation, we used a brief quoting Kerry as saying it wasn't true."

Responses from other news organizations are posted as they come in . . .

ZAPATISTA MEDIA THINKING

Media for Democracy represents a reformist approach. Others call for more radical efforts. Subcommandante Marcos, the charismatic Zapatista rebel leader, taped a message in the mountains of Mexico's impoverished Chiapas region for screening at a January 1997 Freeing the Media teach-in in New York. No networks covered it. He said in part:

The world of contemporary news is a world that exists for the VIPs--the very important people. Their everyday lives are what is important; if they get married, if they divorce, if they eat, what clothes they wear or what clothes they take off--these major movie stars and big politicians. However, common people only appear for a moment--when they kill someone or when they die. For the communications giants, the others, the excluded, only exist when they are dead, when they are in jail or in court. This cannot go on.

It will lead, Marcos warns, to more confrontation. "Sooner or later this virtual world clashes with the real world." Significantly, Marcos and his guerrillas use modern media to transmit their messages, which tend to get stripped of their substance on image-driven TV programs, but do, nevertheless, find a supportive global audience via lengthy communiqués relayed over the Internet. So what were the choices he saw? We can ignore mass media was the first option he considered:

We can have a cynical attitude in the face of the media, to say that nothing can be done about the dollar power that creates itself in images, words, digital communication, and computer systems that invades not just with an invasion of power, but with a way of seeing that world, of how they think the world should look. We could say, well, "that's the way it is" and do nothing.

His second option was to just denounce the media: "...we can simply assume incredulity: we can say that any communication by the media monopolies is a total lie. We can ignore it and go about our lives.

His recommendation was to become the media—to create independent media to take on the big guns."...there is a third option that is neither conformity, nor skepticism, nor distrust: that is to construct a different way-- to show the world what is really happening-- to have a critical world view

and to become interested in the truth of what happens to the people who inhabit every corner of this world.”

The problem is not only to know what is occurring in the world, but to understand it and to derive lessons from it-- just as if we were studying history-- a history not of the past, but a history of what is happening at any given moment in whatever part of the world. This is the way to learn who we are, what it is we want, who we can be and what we can do or not do.

By not having to answer to the monster media monopolies, the independent media has a life work, a political project and purpose: to let the truth be known.

Yet even this approach doesn't recognize yet another option—to engage big media and make it an issue. That involves more than protest or resignation. Not everyone has the inclination, skills or interest to become a media maker. Many are attracted/addicted to mainstream media as a principal source of information. They need to be reached and involved in campaigns for honest coverage and more diverse perspectives. At the same time, they need to be introduced to independent and alternative sources and media outlets critical of the media. This media war has yet to produce an effective opposition, an antiwar movement or cultural resistance that can challenge its trajectory and impact.

CHALLENGING MEDIA

Such a movement, however, is bubbling up from below, with parents calling for a more informative way of rating TV shows to safeguard their children, teachers promoting media literacy, activists asking for corporate accountability, consumers demanding enforcement of antitrust laws, media watchers critiquing news coverage, critics seeking more meaningful program content, producers creating alternative work and independent producers like me agitating for better and fairer journalism.

Media institutions that report on the corporate irresponsibility of others, like the endless stream of indicted Wall Street operators, need to turn the cameras on themselves. How socially responsible and accountable are they? How transparent? Had activists been paying attention, there would have been a protest against revelations in 2000 by the Alliance for Better Campaigns that showed how many local TV stations violated federal laws

by overcharging candidates while reducing their electoral coverage.

What this points to is the need for media students to become media activists not only to become better informed about the way big media works—and the way the government works with it. We are all living in the crosshairs of powerful media institutions. Their fire is “incoming,” into our living rooms—and then into our brains. We need more than self-defense. We need to take collective action to challenge those “cross hairs” and push back. We need to support independent media, with our eyeballs, dollars and our marketing knowhow. We need to encourage media literacy education in our schools. We need to challenge candidates to speak out on these issues, and media outlets to cover them.

And yet, many progressive activists didn’t get it—and still don’t. They give out leaflets and try to buy anti-war ads on TV—many of which were rejected. They have no media strategy beyond reacting to right wing campaigns.

During the 80’s and 90’s, the right invented a bugaboo called the liberal media, and went after it with a vengeance. They complained, criticized, bullied, and created their own media outlets. They didn’t want to take on media; they were determined to take it over. And they seem to be on the way to succeeding.

First, there were opinion magazines, then talk radio, then bloggers like Matt Drudge who soon had his own radio show on Rush Limbaugh’s Network. Then there was the FCC overruling its own staff recommendations not to let Murdoch buy Fox, then there was Republican Guard media guru Roger Ailes financed to launch the Fox News Network, and then, and then—what’s next?.

On the other side, are underfunded, under marketed and under promoted Indy media outlets, which includes a scattering of magazines, weekly newspapers, Pacifica radio, Public access TV, two satellite channels, many websites, and various Indy Media Centers. This can hardly be considered a counterweight to the combined power of mainstream media outlets.

That’s where websites like Mediachannel.org and Mediareform.net, and the research of groups like Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) and Media Tenor come in. They aim to broaden media education and connect to the need to change media, not just understand it,

17. HOW MEDIA OUTLETS BECAME THE NEW CARNIVAL BARKERS

How should we understand this latest and most troubling insight into the reality of our media ecology?

In the aftermath of the resolution of the Great Birther bash-up, even as President Obama tried to lay the issue at rest by producing the document that showed, proved, verified, documented, and validated his birth in one of the great states of our disunion, it was said that its release would only fuel more debate, and convince no one.

In other words, in the end, this long debated fact didn't matter.

Facts no longer seem to matter on other issues, too, as articulated in the now infamous memo issued by retiring Senator Jon Kyl whose office, when confronted with evidence that he misspoke on the matter of how much money Planned Parenthood spent on abortions—he claimed 90%, the truth was but 3%, issued an advisory that said, “The statement was not meant to be factual.”

The Jon Stewart's Daily Show and Stephen Colbert had a lot of fun with that but one thing that's not funny is that even when media coverage discredits or exposes some canard, public opinion is not necessarily impacted.

It doesn't change the minds of those whose minds are made up.

Once some people buy into a narrative or worldview they seem to be locked into a way of thinking. For some, efforts to discredit a conspiracy theory offer more evidence that the conspiracy is valid, because why else would THEY want to refute it.

If you don't trust the President, don't believe he is an American or do believe he is a socialist, nothing he or his supporters say will change your mind. After all, what would you expect them to say?

So even refutation can turn into reinforcement and trigger more stridency.

Dismissing critics as “silly,” as Obama has done, only annoys them and

makes them more determined to cling to their ideas, attitudes and anger.

The values (and prejudices) people grew up with often shape their worldviews. Their parochialism limits what they are exposed to. Their schooling and narrow range of experience seem to have had little impact in broadening their views.

Political scientist Thomas Patterson describes this as “The process by which individuals acquire their political opinions is called political socialization. This process begins in childhood, when, through family and school, Americans acquire many of their basic political values and beliefs. Socialization continues into adulthood, when peers, political institutions and leaders, and the news media are major influences.”

Edward Song on Huffington Post writes, “For example, people who believe in health care reform value helping the poor and needy. For progressives, it is moral to help the poor. ‘

For conservatives, helping the poor is helping people who are irresponsible, and goes against their principle of individual responsibility. The conservative’s solution to poverty is called “Tough Love.” Whether you believe in helping the poor is a matter of values and not a matter of logic. Believing otherwise is the big progressive mistake over the last 40 years.”

Conservative columnists like John Hawkins seem to subscribe to this view too. Writing on Townhall.com, he argues,

“The sad truth of the matter is that most Americans don’t pay much attention to politics and those that do often just parrot doctrine instead of investigating issues with an open mind. This allows lies, myths, and dubious assertions to live on long after they should have shriveled and died in the light of day.”

Surprisingly, he also quotes JFK: “No matter how big the lie; repeat it often enough and the masses will regard it as the truth.”

Media outlets play a role in fashioning a culture of repetition, producing armies of “ditto heads” who are exposed to message-point pseudo journalism that they in turn regurgitate to advance partisan agendas. This approach is built into the design of the new polarizing and politicized media system.

This leads in the words of Vietnam War chronicler Tim O'Brien to how "you lose your sense of the definite, hence your sense of truth itself." He was writing about military wars abroad but his insight applies to political wars at home as well. We are all becoming casualties of a media war in which democracy is collateral damage.

Not surprisingly, the dominance of conservative media produces more people who align themselves as conservatives and will only understand the world that way. The shortage of progressive media outlets limits the mass the circulation of progressive perspectives. No wonder the media marketplace is so devoid of competing ideas.

Beyond that, media outlets legitimize virtually all controversies as valid, however contrived they may be, just to have something to talk about. This legitimates subjects with the noise of continuing blather and contentious discussion featuring superficial analysis by unqualified pundits.

One consequence, according to GOP political consultant Mark McKinnon is that voters cast ballots on attributes not issues. "They want to see the appearance of strength in leaders, and are less persuaded by what they say." That means, news programs ultimately trade in fostering impressions, not conveying information. Viewers trust their feelings over facts.

Remember, one of the most profitable formats on cable TV is not news but wrestling driven by cartoonish characters and invented confrontations. Is it any wonder that ratings hungry news programs take a similar approach to political combat? They are in the business of producing numbers for advertisers more than explanations for viewers.

John Cory commented on the media role in legitimating the birther issue and turning it into a form of entertainment, calling it "a sorry and sad day for America."

"What does it say about our 'media' that they have spent so much time and so much effort promoting crazy over reality? That our 'media' relishes circus clowns jumping out of their clown-cars and spraying clown-seltzer everywhere and then giddily covers the wet and stained audience reaction while ignoring the burning of fact?"

So, it is the media system itself, not Donald Trump or some crazy, that is the

real “carnival barker” in the President’s words, Their programs program the audience by constantly and continually framing issues in a trivial matter. Manipulating emotion is their modality, doubt their currency and cynicism their methodology, except, of course, on issues like the economy, Israel or US wars.

The shame of it is that they know what they are doing, know what the impact of what passes for “coverage” will be, but do it anyway.

18. NEWS FALLING THROUGH THE CRACKS?

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.

-Leonard Cohen “Anthem” on “The Future” (1992)

Have you ever noticed how news following up on the news often falls through the cracks even as it often contradicts what we thought we knew when we first heard about it?

Remember Israel's war on Gaza? The strip was bombed and rocketed to stop it from rocketing Israel. Our media was not allowed in, but reported Israel's version of events. The recent flotilla of humanitarian aid was one of many responses to the humanitarian disaster intensified by that war. A UN report led by South African Judge Richard Goldstone—which, by the way, criticized Palestinians too—was denounced in strident terms. Government boosters in Israel tried to block Goldstone even going to the bar mitzvah of a nephew. Oh the hysteria and righteous indignation, oh the wrath of the accused,

So now, as Netanyahu and Obama, kiss and make up at the white House, Israel reveals that yes indeed there were improper actions by members of its military—not war crimes, of course, but violations of this rule and that, 1400 Gazans died by the way. Israel sort of, kind of, maybe, perhaps admits, yes, there were problems and see how responsible we are in punishing the wrong doers. 4.

Ditto for Israel's embargo on Gaza. After the self-defeating raid on a Turkish ship, leaving nine dead, Israel denied all wrongdoing. Now, after an international clamor for an investigation, Israel is staging its own inquiry and has agreed to loosen up some of the rules it imposed on what could and could not enter Gaza.

Did any media organizations go back to the original stories and show how the propagandists had defined a false narrative? Not really.

Next, let's revisit the aid effort in Haiti a subject of nightly coverage mostly highlighting heroic rescues but with few investigations of how the aid effort had been botched by delays, a lack of coordination, an emphasis on celebrities and little analytical reporting,

This week, the Financial Times went back to find that the island nation faces another disaster on the way. It also reports way down in the article that only 2% of the promised aid got there. Just 2%. Should this be a headline: in the weeks following the January 12 quake, which killed as many as 300,000, it was "total chaos," says Jean-Max Bellerive, Haiti's prime minister. "Now at least it's organized chaos . . . basic needs are being addressed," he says, emphasizing there has been neither hunger crisis nor outbreak of disease.

Still, with at least 1.5 million Haitians in crowded tent cities fast becoming slums, he recognizes Haiti's "fragility" in the hurricane season. "The measures we are taking are for a medium to light hurricane season. If we are hit hard we will have problems," he says.

Some meteorologists predict this hurricane season will be one of the wettest on record. With so many vulnerable, the United Nations' Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs says it is preparing for the worst and feared a "devastating" impact. Adding to the problems is mounting discontent as Haitians feel their plight is not being addressed.

Rene Preval, the president, has called elections in November, and Mr. Bellerive is not optimistic. "I don't believe that there is a single example in the world of a government surviving such a big-scale disaster," he said. Daubed on walls, the slogan "Aba Preval" - down with Preval - has already become a catchall phrase for Haitian dissatisfaction.

Only 2 per cent of the \$5.3bn (€4.2bn, £3.5bn) in short-term aid pledged by the international community has been sent to Haiti.

This is a disgrace---a major betrayal of the millions who gave donations and expected the money to get there. It is an obscenity of our age, but not the only one.

How is it possible for the media outlets to avoid moral judgments when reporting on major crimes but also seem to summon up outrage when they are trashing celebrities found guilty of drunk driving?

MOVEMENTS AND ACTIVISTS

I am a journalist who has also been an activist. My concerns about abuses of power, unresponsive politicians, and corruption in politics had its origins in the years I spent as an activist working in student politics and then the civil rights movement and anti-war activism. As a community organizer, I was exposed to poverty and the lives and oppressive realities of people who at first considered themselves powerless.

I was drawn to the left but not to sectarian parties and ideological debating societies. I became deeply involved in fights for justice and have written about those “Movement Years” in an earlier book, News Dissector.

I also became part of the South African struggle against apartheid. Some of my work there was at the time considered illegal, even terroristic by security forces that ran that country’s police state.

I have finally told the story of how I was one of many then young people recruited to play an underground role back in the mid 1960’s. My essay appears in a book called London Recruits that I am looking forward to read because I never knew who else was involved in the interests of secrecy.

19. THE DAY I JOINED THE REVOLUTION

I was 25 years old. I was righteous and identified with the need for a revolution in my own country and around the world. I had not yet completed my lifelong journey from activist to journalist. I was political. I was passionate. I was part of a generation that wanted change and was determined to be part of the struggle to achieve it.

We were living in the 1960s, revolutionary times in ‘Swinging London’ no less, and of course were shaped by its fashions, hopes, and even some of its illusions. We loved the Beatles and fancied ourselves Street Fighting Men a la The Rolling Stones. We wanted to be Che Guevara (who was killed in 1967). We were engaged and ready to rock. We wanted the War in Vietnam to end and the apartheid system to end with it.

Many of us were available to serve our values and join the fight for justice. Few were chosen.

My opportunity to join a real revolution soon came in the form of a furtive

and hushed invitation from a charismatic friend in the African National Congress to secretly slip into apartheid South Africa, to “help”. It was a chance to put my own life on the line for a cause I believed in and to support a movement I admired. It was hard to say “no” even though I was scared shitless. There, I said it. Scared shitless.

Before I came to the London School of Economics and started running with some South Africans, I had been deeply immersed in the struggle for racial justice in the American civil rights movement. I had been a student activist who dropped out of college to organize in Harlem. I had worked on voter registration campaigns in Mississippi. I knew fear and the saw the ugliness of repression and segregation. I met Martin¹, I bantered with Malcolm². I could sing all the songs. I helped organize the great 1963 March on Washington. I was part of what we called the “MOOVEMENT” i.e. move-ment. It defined me, educated me, and helped me transcend my Jewish roots in a Bronx project. I was not a “red diaper” baby but the whiff of socialism and family history in the labor movement shaped my values. I was the white boy who got it, who could dance and get down.

I also knew about apartheid. My first encounter was through the pages of Life Magazine. I had read Alan Paton’s *Cry the Beloved Country* in High School. At college, I met some South Africans and was outraged by the realities they described. I learned more about the “Winds of Change” transforming Africa. I saw a connection between racism in the USA and the RSA. I also knew that my own country was on the wrong side even though Bobby Kennedy went there and some Americans rallied against apartheid. Like Che, I believed in 1-2-3 Vietnams and saw South Africa as a domino in the great global conflict between imperialism and democracy.

Then, in London, I met Ruth First, the brave South African journalist and activist and now a heroine/legend of the first order. She was in my class at the LSE. Perhaps because we were both outsiders in an often-parochial English academic culture, we became friends. She made South Africa vivid and personal for me. She was a journalist too and a marvelous storyteller. What a story she had.

One of her daughters, Shawn, would later write a fabulous dramatic movie about one chapter of her life called *A World Apart*. Another daughter later wrote a book complaining that her parents had more time for the revolution than for them. They all loved her, and like me, miss her.

She was married to a leader of the ANC's revolution, Joe Slovo, who the press described as "the white man who led a black revolution". They were not part of some academic debating society, but immersed in a real revolution, a war with serious risks and high costs. Many of their comrades were in prison, others in their graves.

There she was, forced into exile, bringing up three girls who I am sure resented her political priorities, but always tied to a struggle far away that consumed so much of her time and energy.

I was more of a New Leftist. She came from an old left tradition but was breaking away in her own way, towards feminism and a stance critical of Stalinism. Through constant fights she pushed her husband Joe, a CPI Stalwart, in the same direction. He would later become the head of the armed struggle, a chief negotiator and Minister in the Mandela government.

She would later be assassinated by a South African spy who sent a book bomb to her in Mozambique on August 17th, 1982. She became a revolutionary martyr. I visited her graveside years later on a reporting assignment in Mozambique.

Ruth and Joe were not directly associated with my decision to "go South" when recruited by Ronnie Kasrils, a fellow student at the LSE and a bundle of determination to transform South Africa through the ANC. (He too would become a Minister.)

Their movement, like many was compartmentalized so I don't know if they even knew. I didn't tell them because I was warned to stay silent for security reasons. I was never meant to be a secret agent - I am too affable and talky for that - but I mostly kept my decision to go on this unpaid "mission" to myself.

That was the first challenge----learning how I thought a secret "operative" (which I really wasn't) was supposed to act. I was anxious to share my fears with others and seek reassurance but I couldn't.

Next, even though the "operation" was not "heavy" (to use a term much overused at the time - I was not armed) I came to understand its importance. The ANC was fighting a life and death battle. Many of its leaders were in prison or forced into exile. They had to communicate with their base in the

country and keep the spirit of resistance alive, or at least its appearance while they regrouped and reorganized.

Sending letters to activists from inside the country and creating a stir that would be relayed by word of mouth and generate a “buzz” was worth the exercise. Guerilla warfare is often about propaganda spread by the deed.

My task was to help deliver some messages, post some mail, and send some political flyers flying in a public place to keep the then banned ANC’s capacity to communicate alive. I was given piles of postcards and told how to get stamps for them and then mail them in a main post office, assuring they would get a postmark. Some of the post cards went to addresses in London so that my “handler” could confirm that that part of the job was done. When I went the post office, I noticed South African soldiers going in. I freaked out, but they were probably sending packages to their aunties. I summoned up the courage to be brazen, to act as if I belonged there.

I had become a “postman” from another world. The mail was sent.

The next part of the mission involved creating what amounted to poster bombs. Bombs sound terroristic but these were part of a propaganda operation. They were simple devices without explosives, but they worked. It involved attaching the clock mechanism of a parking meter to a bundle of ANC flyers.

I was assigned to go to Durban. I took the night train down from Jo’burg. I was on the lookout for people following me and tried not to be obvious - I probably tried too hard and was very obvious. I was convinced I was under surveillance. I walked around and around the streets and looked at where the police cars congregated, and what people wore.

I noticed that many of the whites wore short pants, and I bought myself a pair in an attempt to “blend in”. I realized that while what I was doing, while minor to me, it wouldn’t be if the Police snatched an American with a poster bomb in a satchel, and hundreds of post cards addressed to ANC sympathizers. A wrong move, I realized, and the very people I came to help would be put at risk.

I fiddled with the poster bomb. It kept slipping. Unlike my dad, I was not “handy”. It took a real effort to get it right; I had to place it in the appropriate

location that would give the very subversive (and certainly illegal) flyers the most public visibility. That required reconnoitering and finding a point of entry and egress. I found a parking structure over a busy street. I watched it. I was sure people were watching me.

They probably weren't. I was white in what was then a white city with "non-Europeans" restricted as to where they could live, and even sit. As much as I hated to admit it, I blended in as just another "whitey".

I seem to recall that others who I didn't know were doing the same and that we were all going to set them off at the same time in different cities. I was conscious of the time and timing, and worried that someone might interfere or that I would screw up. I was as scared to abort the mission as to complete it.

Once I found the right place, I had to arrange the device, set the time, turn the meter, and then disappear. In short, order the leaflets would be dumped out in a public street, picked up by some, noticed by pedestrians and probably the police and demonstrate that the ANC was in the country and appealing for anti-apartheid activism and denunciations of the government. It was an ingenious idea and I think I pulled off my "bombing" well. (How innocent this all seems now in a world where serious bombings are a daily occurrence in scores of countries.)

It was hardly a heroic guerrilla mission, but the risks were real. If anything happened, I was told to send a postcard to a mail drop with the stamp upside down. I never figured out how any cops that caught me would allow me to send a last postcard or how that would get me out of jail. I actually put that thought out of my mind. I did my "job". I have a feeling that if captured and connected with a banned organization considered terrorists of the highest order, my "vacation" in Sunny South Africa would have been a prolonged one. I thought of that, years later when I visited Robben Island prison. I would not have liked "living" in that hellhole.

The reasoning for my recruitment made sense: South Africans in exile were too high profile to go "home". They would be arrested on sight. American and English students were not known, and so it was hoped, could slip in as tourists. We were also disposable, as I later realized. The ANC would not suffer a big loss if we were captured. The seriousness of what I had gotten myself into only hit me later.

I was keeping a scrapbook during my years in London.

I wrote:

“On June 27 1967, I turned 25 and a girlfriend wrote me a note which partially speaks to my mental state and the culture I was then part of:

”For your birthday,” she wrote, “I give you permanent immunity from the army, more time in which to do your things, lots of beautiful weather, good food and wine, US withdrawal from Vietnam, a secret map of the Pentagon’s security system, luscious girls falling in love with you helplessly, tact, subtlety and sexuality forever.”

My dad sent his hope “that in your lifetime you should know only happiness and peace.”

Going to a war zone was a funny way of finding peace, but go I did, by plane, BOAC I think, through Kenya and on to Johannesburg. I remember flying into the city of gold. I was sure I would be caught along with my suitcase and its hidden compartment. I was sure they knew I was coming. I didn’t realize what a small fish I was. I breezed through with a “Welcome to South Africa.” It was a terrifying moment.

Afterwards, I would tell myself how stupid I had been, how dangerous it would have been had I been busted as an agent of a “terrorist movement.” (Yes, Nelson Mandela’s movement had been outlawed as terrorist under South Africa’s draconian Suppression of Communism Act). South Africans then, were like some Americans today, fearing terrorists under every bed. Robben Island was a segregated jail but I am sure the Apartheid police state had an empty cell for me and my ilk.

I was supposed to keep to myself, talk to no one, blend in, stick to the routine and use my White Skin privilege. I had rehearsed and reviewed the itinerary that was planned for me. I did what I went to do but I couldn’t just do that. It was just not my style. I was an adventurer and this was the ultimate adventure. I just wasn’t disciplined enough. I had to see the country and get a sense of the movement, which was, I later learned, well underground.

What I didn’t know then would be how that trip, and the encounter it gave

me with South Africa, would change my life forever, would involve me in that struggle for the next 30 years, would lead me to write countless articles, make five films with Nelson Mandela and produce 156 weeks of a TV Series called South Africa Now.

I went to South Africa in “the summer of love” but in some ways never left. In fact, I fell in love with the country and its promise, something I, unlike others, lived to see.

Before I took the trip, I tried to make it sound as if I was just fulfilling an obligation and then would quickly move on to other pursuits after I did my “duty.” I actually wrote that in the form of a poem of sorts under the heading of 23 July 67 and tucked it away.

I am surprised now about its anti-political tone as I re-read it and how ambivalent I really was. Maybe I was just posturing as if this was no big thing. In fact, this small sojourn would turn out to be a very big thing although I have avoided talking about it because it was also clearly a case of a journalist crossing the line from a supposed “objectivity” to advocacy. Remember, I was still a student.

Even now, I fear that this story might end up in the CIA file that I know the government has on me. I have seen an earlier incarnation, all blacked out, documenting my days in London. (It was as screwed up then as intelligence is today from Iraq - some things never change.)

I actually have a picture of Dick Cheney in my mind, who I met and quarreled with bitterly in 1966, getting the CIA file with this article added to it with a note that says, “You were right, he always was a terrorist!” Recall that this Dick refused to support a Congressional motion calling for the freedom of Nelson Mandela. But, I digress.

My hesitations then were honest and naïve and expressed this way in a poetic journal entry written on the very day I left London for South Africa. Can you believe I saved it?

23 July 67

“This trip that I make,
In fear,
With hope
Is my response to language
I am overstuffed with
Declamations and admonitions,
Exclamation points!
Let’s be done with it
Already & move on
There are bigger
Things, more important
Matters

The personal mystery
The joy of construction
The fever for creation
All of these things make politics a lesser concern
And its destructiveness
An absurd disposition
So I will pitch in,
”Do my Bit”
And speed the moment
When larger
Visions can be pursued.

We have to start somewhere.”

At the bottom of the page, I noted later, “On 12 September I returned alive & wiser.”

Wiser indeed. Issues and problems can be abstractions until you see them for yourself, until you go there. I have been back to South Africa many times but I will never forget the first time. (We always remember the first time in our pursuits, don’t we? Smile. I have written about the experience (sans the “secret stuff”) in my book *The More You Watch the Less You Know* about my later career in big media.

I “went out to Africa” then, as I told my friends, for a three-week holiday

on a student fare. In some ways, I've never come back. I'm not sure what it is about that country that exerts such a pull but I'm not the only journalist to whom it has happened. Joe Llelyveld, a former editor of The New York Times, won a Pulitzer for a book about South Africa. In it, he wrote that no country he'd ever covered had the same personal impact on him.

For many years, when people ask me when I was last there, I tend to say "this morning," because for so many years I have been deeply immersed in reading about, researching, reporting on and in effect living with South Africa. It is as if some South African gene had gotten mixed up in my DNA.

Some South Africans were sure I grew up there, perhaps because one of their most famous racecar drivers is Jody Schecter. But I didn't. I developed a passion for the country's people and their struggle from a distance and it wouldn't let me go.

I realize now that the relationship has been unequal: I have received far more from the transaction than I have given.

South Africa is a special place, an eerie mix of the familiar and unfamiliar set against a landscape that is magical in its beauty. Every contrast there is pointed, every contradiction, revealing. Squatter camps perch in fancy neighborhoods. Horrible racial oppression co-exists with enough relaxed moments of racial interaction to make New York seem far more tense and polarized.

Almost every white South African has been raised by a black nanny, and yet every black has been united by a history of oppressive laws and attitudes. At the same time, for many there is an interracial intimacy that has always conflicted with the reality of apartheid.

When I first visited in 1967 during the "summer of love" in America, South Africa was firmly in the grip of its first State of Emergency. There were few visible indications of black protest. As a civil rights worker in the U.S., I looked for such signs and thought that I, of all people, would be able to sniff them out if they were there. In Mississippi, at the height of the anti-segregation confrontation back in '64, white "nawthin" college kids like me had no problem getting black people to express their feelings or talk about "the man." That was my experience at home, but not here.

South Africa was not the American South, and apartheid was never another name for segregation. We could at least appeal to a Constitution that theoretically guaranteed everyone's rights. In South Africa, the law upheld racism and there was no Constitution. Apartheid was as much a labor system as a racial one, and blatant economic exploitation was as much the problem as racial separation.

Ironically, the first thing I saw when the airport bus deposited me at the Jo'burg train station was a newspaper headline "Detroit Riot: 37 Dead." A year earlier I had worked in Detroit for Mayor Jerry Cavanaugh, whose claim to fame was that he had prevented a Watts-type riot. His luck had run out. The Motor City was in flames. I was reading about it in, of all places, South Africa, where a police state had been established to make sure rebellions like that didn't occur. At that moment, America's racial problems seemed worse. Our civil rights movement was disintegrating in the bitterness of insurrection and internecine racial division; South Africa's movement was on hold, but poised to erupt again.

It was hard for me to meet black people there. Attempts to even make eye contact with black workers guarding white property in Durban were unsuccessful. They stared past me and spoke to each other in Zulu. I felt frozen out, however much I naively wanted them to think of me as a brother, as an ally in the liberation struggle. I was white, therefore one of their oppressors. I later realized that I had reduced the problem to one of race when it was far more layered and complex. Those Zulu workers most likely didn't speak English and if so couldn't understand me. Many had also been taught as children that eye contact with strangers is impolite.

I found the unextinguished flames of the South African struggle quite by accident, after I drew a bath at a small Durban beach hotel. I started reading the paper, noticing an announcement that the next day a funeral would be held not far away for Chief Albert Luthuli, then President-General of the African National Congress and a Nobel Peace Prize winner. He had died mysteriously, allegedly in a train accident in the rural area to which the government had banished him. I was thinking about going to the funeral when I noticed that I hadn't been watching the tub. It had overflowed, with water spilling over into the hall.

I jumped up, unplugged the bath and raced one floor down to the lobby to find a mop. The Indian man behind the desk said, "No, no, I'll send the boy

up,” referring to the African man sitting to his right. I didn’t see any boys. I shot back: “No, no, just give me a mop. I made the mess. I’ll clean it up.”

He and the “boy” came upstairs with me, and we all dried the small flood. I asked them to please not call me baas. He smiled. The Indian guy told me that I was the first white man there who had ever cleaned up after himself. That broke the ice. I then asked how I could get a ride to Luthuli’s funeral. At first, he said it wasn’t safe, and then disclosed that he and a cousin were going to see their family in a nearby Indian township and that they would take me if I chipped in a few Rand for gas.

Sure enough, the next day, a brilliant Sunday morning alongside the Indian Ocean, I piled into a crowded jalopy with a few other Indian passengers who were also paying for the ride. As we passed through Natal’s rolling hills and vast sugar plantations, we noticed several planes flying close to the ground, circling up ahead. They were monitoring the funeral site. “That is the church where the funeral is taking place,” I was told. “It’s not safe to take you there directly.”

Instead, he dropped me off about 300 yards away, on a dusty side road. “We will pick you up exactly here in one hour, sharp,” I was told. “Be here because it is not safe to wait.” This man seemed to have a fixation with the words “not safe.”

He knew something I didn’t.

As I started toward the church, camera in hand, I noticed about a hundred black people in khaki uniforms lining up for what looked like a parade and carrying black, gold and green flags. I recognized them from pictures as the flag and uniforms of the ANC. But the ANC was banned, their leader, Nelson Mandela locked away for life on Robben Island near Cape Town, clear across the country. This wasn’t supposed to be happening. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing, and started taking pictures, walking with them as they marched up to and into the church.

It must have been a strange sight, that small army of chanting black militants with a (then) skinny, longhaired white kid tagging along. (Yup, I was skinny once.) They marched right past a larger army of police who had the place totally surrounded. They weren’t stopped, I was told later, because much of the Western diplomatic corps led by the Swedish Ambassador were

there along with some western reporters. Some white policemen started taking pictures of us. I was told that some of the demonstrators were quietly picked up later.

The place was inundated with plainclothes as well as uniformed cops. A few started pointing at me as if to ask, "Who is that guy and where did he come from?" They probably had all the whites accounted for. Most had been brought into this African area, with permission, under escort. I had just shown up on my own. Suddenly the words "not safe" took on a real meaning.

Inside the church, the ANC folks took up positions in front of their chief's coffin and unfurled their flag. One small, uniformed black man put his right thumb in the air in the ANC salute, keeping it there for almost the whole ceremony. I kept staring at him, not believing his strength and fortitude in a heroic gesture of defiance.

And then the singing started, hymns that reminded me of many a hot night in Mississippi when freedom songs were the movement's first line of solidarity against the cops and the Klan. South Africa's church music and freedom hymns were even more vibrant, rich with call and response rhythms. The sound made you ache with its beauty. That's when I first heard Nkosi Sikeleli Afrika (Lord Bless Africa), then banned, now a national anthem.

The speeches were electric in their intensity, including one by a young student, president of the National Union of South African Students or NUSAS. Her name was Margaret Marshall, and she was as gorgeous as she was eloquent. I was not prepared for someone who was so white and blond to also be so eloquent and uncompromising in her denunciation of apartheid. At that time in South Africa, it was dangerous to speak or write about such things. Her words were received with great warmth by Luthuli's family.

The great South African writer, Alan Paton, also was hand, but Margie's remarks were more memorable. We would become friends when she moved to Boston as part of an outflow of white liberals. She later married Anthony Lewis of The New York Times and became the chief Judge on the highest court in Massachusetts. (She retired recently!)

After spending some time in the Natal area, I traveled on to Cape Town, the

“mother city,” a place that might have been in England if it wasn’t for the beautiful Table Mountain and the vast African townships that surrounded it. I remember visiting the Parliament buildings and watching a group of liberal whites hold a vigil. I think I may have brought them a flower or two, as a symbol of the hippie-yippie counterculture I was also very much part of. It sounds stupid when I write about it now.

An American friend put me up in a quiet suburban community near the beach. Her beau, a white jazz musician, an excellent bass player, who played in one of the country’s few interracial bands, took me on a tour of Guguletu, a nearby township. We went without the proper pass, got intercepted by the police and asked to leave. I was there long enough to see the great gap that existed then, and exists now, between white wealth and black poverty. It remains the biggest such gap in the world.

In Johannesburg, I toured Soweto on a government tourist bus that cost about 25 cents and included a stop for tea at an official tourist center that would be burned to the ground years later in the Soweto uprising. I wrote about that trip anonymously for the Village Voice. The bus stopped at government-backed workshops for the disabled, took in a model crèche or nursery school, stopped at the weirdly named Uncle Tom’s Hall (a community center) and toured that section of Soweto where the handful of black millionaires lived. If you could imagine a German sightseeing trip through “Auschwitz-Land,” that’s what it felt like.

On April 27, 1994, I found myself back at Uncle Tom’s, which hadn’t changed very much, to film something that had: South Africa’s first democratic and interracial elections. On that day, vast lines stretched in front of the hall while thousands waited patiently for voter cards.

One of the things I saw was how the texture of their struggle was not being reported well in our own country. For years now, through articles, on the radio, television and films, I’ve tried to report on what’s missing, to fill in some gaps. I am sure that similar problems exist in the coverage of other countries, as well as our own, but South Africa has unique characteristics, and became a prism through which to view, and judge, the world.

When I first went there, there was no hope. On my last trip, there was nothing but. Did my “mission” make a difference? Maybe a small one at first, but I would like to think, a larger one later as I used what skills I

had with projects like Sun City and South Africa Now to try to wake up America to the truth about South Africa.

Back in 1967, none of us would have believed how long it would take to win the country back and how much misery, heartbreak, murder, and madness was yet to come. The Soweto uprising was years away as were the township uprisings. The idea of a peaceful change occurred to only a few. Many dismissed it as an unachievable dream.

And yet, it happened. History happened. South Africa became the rainbow nation, a world “miracle” at a time of so few miracles. Many in that world credit Nelson Mandela but he and all of us who became involved, and stayed involved, know it was much more than one man - it was the powers of leaders with integrity, men like Oliver Tambo, and the Sisulus and Chris Hani and Ruth and Joe and Ronnie and Pallo and so many others, who sparked and led the ANC and its people’s movement.

It was the determination of millions that made a difference, with songs to lift our hearts, toyi- toyis to move our feet and slogans like Amandla Ngawethu and Viva to free Mandela and move the movement forward. And I am sure there were many more secret “missions” that we still can’t talk about yet that helped, or in my words then, “did their bit.”

The activists who invited me into their movement back in the 1960s believed they could liberate their country, and fought with dogged determination through all the dark times. They also believed in me, a person who cared, from a far-away land and a culture that was not their own. I say Viva for that.

They didn’t give up, and neither have I.

Yes, I know problems remain. The contradictions are still everywhere, now as then. We have not achieved nirvana there or here, but I was proud to be asked and prouder to serve in the small way I did. Doctors pledge to “do no harm”. I did none, and maybe did some good.

As my friend Abbie Hoffman would later say of our student movement in 1960s America that fights for real democracy still, “We were young. We were foolish, naïve and made mistakes. But we were right.”

20. A RANT FOR RICK: A CNBC ANALYST LAUNCHES THE TEA PARTY

I just love to see CNBC coming out of the closet of feigned impartiality.

Now that it has gotten the denunciations of greed out of its system with that House of Cards docu-tract, it's time to get back to cheerleading for the wrong side of the economic war. I did my own rant about CNBC, which was actually recorded, by CNN and run for a few seconds on its power lunch show taking the network to task for rarely giving homeowners a fair break in terms of news coverage.

Now, CNBC contributor Rick Santelli confirmed my worst fears with a rant from the pits of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange denouncing "losers" as in people victimized by predatory lending, a term he doesn't use or seem to even recognize. In contrast, he praised his colleagues as real Americans.

Picking on struggling homeowners, he denounced the Obama Housing Plan comparing it to policies in Cuba, a country that doesn't have mass foreclosures as far as I know. He was rallying his fellow traders in an on-air call for a Chicago Tea Party as if he and his groupies are the aggrieved parties. (Remember that the original Boston Tea Party was actually a protest by merchants, not the masses, against British taxes that undercut their businesses.)

Rather than repudiate his use of a TV News slot for agitational and political advocacy purposes, The New York Times tells us that CNBC is capitalizing on his newfound celebrity. "Once upon a time, cable channels were embarrassed by on-air outbursts or other anchor antics," reports the paper of record. "Now, some are glad to post the video clips on the Internet as quickly as possible to maximize publicity and Web traffic." You can imagine how quickly CNBC would cut me off if I tried a stunt like his. (When I did try, they aired a few seconds and refused to have me on to elaborate. Why wasn't I surprised?)

Who is he and what's the agenda here? He is being treated like the TV incarnation of Joe the Plumber On the air he said flamboyantly, "We're thinking of having a Chicago Tea Party in July. All you capitalists that wanna show up to Lake Michigan, I'm organizing," Santelli fumed yesterday.

“We’re gonna be dumping in some derivative securities, what do you think about that?”

Turns out, according to the Atlantic, “Santelli may not be the one organizing after all: the conservative American Free Market Fund’s American Future Fund’s petition, launched yesterday afternoon, invites signers to attend such a party in Chicago in July. 3,500 people have pledged to attend, the group says, and the idea of busing people in has been floated. That’s on top of two smaller sites dedicated to promoting Santelli’s suggestion.

“The Chicago Tea Party of 2009 will reinvigorate that American and Patriotic spirit; one that demands respect for individual rights and property,” one of the sites, www.reteaparty.com, promises.”

Reaction in Chicago has not all been excited as I discovered in visiting the Jack and Jill, self-described as a “black bourgeoisie perspective on US politics:”

“Who is this Rick Santelli? A freakin poster boy for deregulation. He’s made his career off of it. MR. HEDGE FUND himself from CNBC.com. He joined CNBC from the Institutional Financial Futures and Options at Sanwa Futures, L.L.C. There, he was a vice president handling institutional trading and hedge accounts for a variety of futures related products. Prior to that, Santelli worked as vice president of Institutional Futures and Options at Rand Financial Services, Inc., served as managing director at the Derivative Products Group of Geldermann, Inc., and was Vice President in charge of Interest Rate Futures and Options at the Chicago Board of Trade for Drexel, Burnham, Lambert.

Santelli began his career in 1979 as a trader and order filler at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange in a variety of markets including gold, lumber, CD’s, T-bills, foreign currencies and livestock he should have been screaming, I’m a greedy bastard and I don’t want ANY regulation so that I can continue to be a greedy criminal, because Wall Street’s behavior can be likened to crimes, so greedy to the point that those like me will continue to cripple the economy with our fucked up economic philosophies. This prick is see-through

I can’t be stronger than that, but the significance of his association with his former firm for Drexel, Burnham, Lambert was glossed over. That is

the firm closed down by the government. Its guru Michael Milliken went to prison for his illegal trading activities. Funny, how we you scratch a moralizer like Santelli, you find ghosts in his closet.

Why isn't our media reporting on all the people who are talking back to Rick The Ranter, but who don't have a General Electric owned channel behind him.

Here are other comments:

“And now, that we're trying to help people on the ground - sure, some of them took out loans that they couldn't afford. But, how about those who were straight up DEFRAUDED? How about the ones who SHOULD have qualified for CONVENTIONAL mortgages, but because of INSTITUTIONAL RACISM IN THE BANKING INDUSTRY, were herded into SUBPRIME mortgages?

How entire communities of this country - on MAIN STREET - are being wiped out because of this foreclosure crisis. And, foreclosures just don't devastate those who lost their homes. Their neighbors see their property values plummet with every foreclosure in their neighborhoods. This is the reality on MAIN STREET.”

In criticizing Santelli, that doesn't mean I believe that Obama's economic plan goes far enough. Paul Krugman was in the Times yesterday calling for temporary nationalization of “Zombie Banks” He is trying to push the Administration to acknowledge the real problem and respond more forcefully even as the GOP seems to be viewing him as a Socialist in centrist clothing.

James Howard Kunstler who is kinder to Santelli than I am sees that even the wrong spark can get a prairie fire going.

“The public perception of the ongoing fiasco in governance has moved from sheer, mute incomprehension to goggle-eyed panic as the scrim of unreality peel away revealing something like a national death-watch scene in history's intensive care unit. Is the USA in recession, depression, or collapse? People are at least beginning to ask. Nature's way of hinting that something truly creepy may be up is when both Paul Volcker and George Soros both declare on the same day that the economic landscape is looking

darker than the Great Depression.

Those tuned into the media-waves were enchanted, in a related instance, by Rick Santelli's grand moment of theater in the Chicago trader's pit last week when he seemed to ignite the first spark of revolution by demonstrating that bailout fatigue had morphed into high emotion -- and that the emotion could be marshaled against public policy. The traders in the pit on-screen seemed to color up and buzz loudly, like ordinary grasshoppers turning into angry locusts preparing to ravage a waiting valley. "Are you listening, President Obama?" Mr. Santelli asked portentously.

In the broad blogging margins of the web that orbit the mainstream media like the rings of Saturn, an awful lot of reasonable people have begun to ask whether President Obama is a stooge of whatever remains of Wall Street, with Citigroup and Goldman Sachs's puppeteer, Robert Rubin, pulling strings behind an arras in the Oval Office. Personally, I doubt it, but it is still a little hard to understand what the President is up to.

For one thing, the stimulus package, so-called, looks more and more like national sub-prime mortgage itself, a bad bargain made under less-than-realistic terms, with future obligations fobbed onto whoever inhabits this corner of the world for the next seven hundred years -- and all to pay for a bunch of granite counter-tops and flat-screen TVs."

21. OCCUPY WALL STREET'S SIX MONTH ANNIVERSARY LEADS TO A NEW CONFRONTATION

New York, New York, March 17, 2012: To the rest of the world, March 17th is St Patrick's Day, an occasion that does not always bring out the best in the wearers of the Green.

To Occupy Wall Street, it was a day of celebration too---an anniversary: marking the sixth month since the movement burst on the scene, and changed the global conversation about the economy by interjecting the reality of deepening economic inequality.

How would you expect occupiers to commemorate an occasion like this?

By doing some occupying, of course, especially in the midst of what many Americans think of as "March Madness." a phrase used in the U.S. to describe a cultural mania triggered by highly competitive college basketball finals.

Mush this all together and you get what happened on Saturday night, when hundreds of determined activists converged on Zuccotti Park, a.k.a. Liberty Square, the park near Wall Street from which they had been forcibly evicted months earlier.

They had come, they said, to reoccupy the public space.

As it happened, the annual "Left Forum" that brought 1400 radical speakers to a nearby university for a talkathon on the future of progressive politics was being addressed that night by well-known filmmaker, the Academy Award winner Michael Moore.

He called on the crowded auditorium that came to hear him speak to join him in marching to the Park that many did, chanting, "we are unstoppable, another world is possible."

The New York City Police Department has, at billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg's direction, been fighting its own hostile war against Occupy. It was monitoring the situation closely.

The police were at the ready, thanks to their intelligence monitoring capacity, which includes more than a few infiltrators and provocateurs as well as sophisticated internet and videotape surveillance around the clock.

For many cops, this “duty” is attractive because of the extra pay. The City announced last week that, in these harsh economic times, it spent \$17 million dollars in police overtime to protect Wall Street from what they see as a subversive mob.

For many of the men and women in blue, this money is manna from heaven.

Soon, these two armies were clashing in the night. The gendarmerie ultimately surrounded the park, and closed it down with its superior armed force, pushing the occupiers into the street, and some into jail, before barricading it.

More than one hundred were arrested among the largely non-violent militants. Some ended up being thrown into cells with some of those busted for being violent or over inebriated (i.e. publicly drunk) in the St Paddy’s Day festivities.

The cops claimed three casualties and said they were investigating a mysterious tweet that said “We won’t make a difference if we don’t kill a cop.’ While that sounded bogus to many activists in the movement who suspect the cops planted it, there is a growing debate about the role of violence.

The question: should activists retaliate against police violence with violence of their own? Is violence in self-defense legitimate?

Some of the more extreme militants in the anarchist camp---especially those grouped around the so-called “black bloc” made up largely of angry and more anti-social activists who see the police as “the enemy,” justify more violent tactics by street fighters.

Others in the movement argue that violence is being encouraged or carried out by undercover cops to alienate the public and confuse the movement’s message. The media usually plays up any violence—as in ‘when it bleeds, it leads”—and makes that the story, not Occupy’s politics.

This issue was debated at the Left Forum. Arun Gupta, who started the Occupied Wall Street Journal newspaper, told a plenary that he does not believe the police are the enemy, however abusive they are. He called on the movement to keep its focus and avoid confrontations.

Former New York Times reporter Chris Hedges who has covered wars in the Balkans and the Middle East was harsher, explicitly lambasting the Black Bloc for undermining the movement and estranging it from growing public support.’

He embraced the spirit of non-violent direct action of the kind advocated by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

His remarks received applause at the Forum, but is not clear how many of the Black Bloc were even there. Few seem to base their tactics on any rational or intellectual calculation. So far, most of the movement has reaffirmed a commitment to non-violence but with more criticism of the police than the street thugs among them.

The Nation reports that there have been semi-secret meeting of Occupy activists to discuss ways to handle this rift.

Writes Nathan Schneider, “Let’s be clear: it’s not like the movement has considered stashing weapons, or making bombs, or anything close. Direct Action has never made a plan to harm anyone. Part of the problem is that talk of violence and nonviolence is still mainly in the abstract, pivoting on words that are hard to define and incidents of property destruction or in-the-moment reaction that most have only seen filtered through unreliable news reports.”

There are other and perhaps more important uncertainties hanging over the movement as Spring arrives and more activists get more involved or reinvolved.

Movement activists had been promising a “spring offensive” of some kind but observers like Nation editor Richard Kim poses many questions:

“There’s no question that Occupy will be back this spring—it never really went away. But what will this second stage look like? Will it continue to function largely as a set of loosely connected, issue-based campaigns?

Or, will it retake public space and re-establish physical encampments and general assemblies as the heart of the movement? How much attention will it pay to the upcoming elections? Is Occupy's chief value as a branding device to focus the attention of the 99 percent on the issue of inequality? Alternatively, is it the leading edge of what will become a more radically anti-capitalist revolution?

There are no ready answers to these questions anymore than we know how far what Chris Hedges denounced as "State Secret Surveillance" will do to undermine its re-emergence.

Already two Senators, Colorado's Mark Udall and Oregon's Ron Wyden have said they are "stunned" to learn how the FBI and the Justice Department are using sections of the Patriot Act to broadly gather intelligence based on secret legal opinions.

They raised their concerns as members of the Senate Intelligence Committee with the hope of pushing the Justice Department into revealing secret legal opinions that have been used in the U.S. Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act court to justify intelligence-gathering operations.

More insidiously, Wired Magazine has just revealed the existence of a new Data Center in Utah that will dramatically escalate government spying on US citizens.

"A project of immense secrecy, it is the final piece in a complex puzzle assembled over the past decade. Its purpose: to intercept, decipher, analyze, and store vast swaths of the world's communications as they zap down from satellites and zip through the underground and undersea cables of international, foreign, and domestic networks.... Flowing through its servers and routers and stored in near-bottomless databases will be all forms of communication, including the complete contents of private emails, cell phone calls, and Google searches, as well as all sorts of personal data trails—parking receipts, travel itineraries, bookstore purchases, and other digital "pocket litter."...

So, the crackdown on Occupy Wall Street may only be the beginning of a new wave of repression with vast implications for dissent and social change. All the government needs to have—or create—are new pretexts for a crackdown.

22. LEXICON FOR LIBERATION: AN A-Z OF OCCUPY WALL STREET

Every social movement I have been involved with, or covering, invents its own language of liberation, its own alphabet, and its own buzzwords, rhetoric and discourse. Here are some of the key words I heard/retained in covering the Occupy Wall Street movement. I am sure there are many words, phrases, and slogans I overlooked, never heard, or forgot.

These are words that power a struggle and speak to the internal processes that attracted so many to take part, as well as the issues that drive it and the obstacles that face it. They are some of the phrases, terms, sayings and expressions that the occupiers use in their conversations to define themselves and discuss their mission.

A. Adbusters, Anarchy, Arrest, Activist, Action, Anger, Angry, Atrium, Assembly (Freedom of,) Arab Spring, Autonomy, Anonymous. All Night, All Week, Austerity, Autumn Awakening

B. Bloomberg, Billionaire, Banker, Bank Transfer, Bankster, Barricade, Brookfield, Brooklyn Bridge, Battery, Bowling Green, (The) Bull, Bubble Tea, Building 7, Bishop, Burger King (Bathrooms), Bailout, Broke, BOA, Municipal Bonds, Bail Bonds, Bonus, Block, Beginning (As in “The Beginning Is Near.”) Become (Your Dream)

C. Capitalism, CEO, Central Booking, Convergence, Corporate, Co-op, Cedar St. Congress, Campaign, Cops, Comrades, Comfort, Confrontation, Community, Courts, Church, Chase, Cairo. Citibank, Contract, Clusters, Class, Color, Caucus, Citizens, Charlotte’s Web, Community Board, Courage, Causes (Not Symptoms), Citizens United. Control

D. D17, demonstration, direct Democracy democracy, democratize, Donate, Drumming, Drones, Derivatives, Depression, Debt, Donuts, Downtown, Down With, Deutsche Bank, DC, Diogenes, Duarte Square, Diversity, Dialogic, Discourse, Debate, Dow Jones, Dreamers, Decolonization, Discipline

E. Encampment, Events, Engage, Equity, Everyone, Eviction, Elite, Economic Elite, Economy, Exercising (Our Rights), Egypt, Enacting (The

Impossible)

F. Freedom, Fed, (as in End The) Facebook, Foreclosure, Foley Square, Faith Leaders, Fifty Broadway, Front Line (on Broadway)

G. Greed, GA, Garbage, Goldman Sachs, Ground Zero, Generator, General Strike, Guy Fawkes, Global, Guards (as in Brookfield Realty), Grievances, Grannies

H. Hope, Horizontalism, Hand Gestures, Hacking, Habeus, Hugs, Hypothermia, Health Care, Not Hedge Funds, Homeland Security, Halal,

I. Internet, Info, infiltrator, inequality, injury, insurgency, Indignados

J. Justice, Judge, Jobs, JP Morgan

K. Kitchen, Kettling,

L. Leaderless. Labor. Legal, Love, Library (as in People's), Live Stream, Lower Zuc, Liberty Square, Liberty Street, Lehman Brothers, Loans, Leverage, Libertarian, LAPD

M. Mic Check, Money, Mickey D (Toilets), Movement, Mobilization, March, Media, Medical Tent, Motorcycle Cops,, Meditate, Mohammed Bouazizi, Men's Holding Cell, First Precinct, Matrix. Militant, MF Global, Metrocard

N. Now, Nurse, Nonviolent Training, NYPD, NYFD, NDAA, N+1, National Lawyers Guild, Ninety Nine Percent, Native Americans

O. OWS, Occupation, Occupy, OccuPie, Occupy Times Square, Occupy Broadway, Occupy the Holidays, Occupy Thanksgiving, Occupy Christmas, Occupy The Hood, Occupy The Barrio, Occupy The World, Occupy Our Homes, Occupy The Dream, Occupy Buildings, Occupy Workplaces, Occupy 2.0, Outreach, O40 (Organizing for Occupation), Overthrow (The Courts), Oakland, One Percent

P. Pizza, Pizza, Pizza, Power Public Space, Peace, Peaceful. Protest, Pepper Spray, Police, Police Foundation, Poster, Press, Parks. Personhood (Corporate), Privatization, Point of Process, Predator, Precarity, Plunder,

Private Army, Profit. Port, Public Safety, Poverty (as in growing), Profiteering (as in Growing), Pressure, Populism, Plutocracy

Q. Question

R. Revolution, Re-occupy, Righteous, Restraining Order, rage,, Raid (as in police Raid), Ratings. Reverend Billy, Reclaim Democracy, Riot Squad (“Take Off Your Riot Gear, There’s No Riot Here”)

S. Speech (As in Free), Strategy, Security, Symbols, System, Sanctuary, Sustainable, Spies, Surveillance, Struggle, Stock Exchange, Sign, Solidarity, Subways (A,C,N,R,1 2 3 4,5), Sanitation, Sleeping Bag, Starbucks (Toilet), Sothebys, Social Media, Spokes, Spokesouncil, Sixty Wall, Student Loans, Shutdown, Sell Out, Spring (and the Hope Of Renewal) Supreme Court

T. Truth Telling, Tidal, Thermal, Thematic, Tactics, Trust, Tarp, TARP, Twitter Tumblr, Trinity, Traders, Tents, TV Trucks, TURU Truck, Toilets, Tombs, Tunisia, The Commons, T-Shirt. Turning Point, Think Tank, Troy Davis

U. Unemployment, Unity, Unions, Up Stream, Union Square, Unleadership, UC Davis, UFT

V: Victory, Veterans, Vegan, Vegetarian, Videos (You Tube)

W. Wall Street, workers, Web Site, Workgroup, Welcome Desk, White Shirt, White Collar Crime, Wikileaks, Washington Square, Winter, Weird Red Thing, Walk (To Washington), Whose Street? (Our Street), “Walmart for Rats” Media (Putdown of Zuccotti Park), Wachovia, We Are Everywhere, We Are The 99%, War (No More)

X. Xhale, Extraordinary

Y. Youth, You Cannot Evict An Idea Whose Time Has Come, Yippie, Yippie Museum

Z. Zuccotti Park, Zephyr the Therapy Dog At Medical Tent

23. A TIME TO SPEAK UP: HELEN THOMAS AWAITS ANOTHER BIG DISS FROM FELLOW JOURNOS

The Society for Professional Journalists [SPJ] is preparing to jump on the “kick Helen Thomas when she is down” campaign by retiring a lifetime achievement award that honors this great American journalist. She is being sanctioned for speaking out against Israel in a manner that offended some, despite her clarification.

This new, knee-jerk, self-righteous “look how responsible we are” capitulation to outside pressure must be resisted.

A fellow Detroiter, former editor and media executive, Lloyd H. Weston, is challenging his fellow SPJ members to support Helen and has backed her in a letter to Editor & Publisher magazine. He wrote the following to SPJ’s Executive Committee that has now postponed its decision for ten days by referring the decision to their whole board. He writes in part:

Distinguished Members of the Executive Committee:

Allow me to introduce myself in the context of this serious, important and, to me, disturbing issue that is on your agenda for the January 8, 2011 meeting of your committee.

My name is Lloyd H Weston and I am one of you. I have been a journalist and a newspaperman for at least 50 of my 68 years of life. In junior high school, I learned to set type, manually, one letter at a time, and how to use a hand printing press. Today, I am teaching myself the “magic” of transposing newspapers and magazines onto iPads.

In between, I joined this beloved organization in the early 1960s, becoming president of the Wayne State University chapter of Sigma Delta Chi and graduating with a degree in journalism and an SDX key in 1964. Until I moved to Chicago, I was a member of the Detroit Professional Chapter, and am now a member and past-director of the Chicago Headline Club.

I have been a reporter, editor, publisher and newspaper owner, most recently (like so many of our colleagues these days) involuntarily retired from the

Chicago Sun-Times News Group and Pioneer Press Newspapers.

I have been active in synagogues, B'nai B'rith and other Jewish organizations all my life, and I have been a reporter for both The Chicago Jewish News and The Forward newspaper. Never once in my entire career – until about a month ago – have I felt any sense of conflict between Judaism and Journalism. I have since -- in my own mind and through this and other letters I have written in the last few weeks – concluded – as I have really known all my life -- that there is no conflict. Ask me to show you two people in the entire world who cherish freedom more than life itself, and I will show you an American Jew and an American Journalist!

(Giving a nod to full disclosure, let me say that I have been – and remain -- a fan of Helen Thomas since I watched those 1960s JFK press conferences in college. But I did not actually meet Helen until I ran into her one day in the Press Compound at the Democratic National Convention in Boston in 2004. I introduced myself as a fellow WSU alumnus. She hugged me and we chatted briefly. I could not have been more delighted than a teenage girl meeting her favorite rock star. The next and last time I saw Helen was a few years later at a book signing in the Chicago area... a meeting which gravely saddened me at how old and feeble [she was very hard of hearing] she had become in such a short time.

(Let me add that, a couple of weeks ago I did receive a complimentary e-mail from Helen's nephew, whom I have never met. I have not, however, communicated with Helen in any way, or heard from her, since that book signing, nor do I expect to.)

I no more believe that Helen Thomas is an anti-Semite than I believe in Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny. But the issue before you this week has nothing to do with anti-Semitism. It is not about Israel or Zionism. It is not about the Jews, the Palestinians or the Arabs. It is not even about Helen Thomas.

The only issue on your table today is whether SPJ stands for the unabridged right of any journalist – any American – to speak his or her opinion, on any subject, without fear of punishment or retribution from any government, individual, private or professional organization. To remove Helen Thomas' name from the SPJ Lifetime Achievement Award, I believe, would constitute such dire abridgement, punishment and retribution.”

I, for one, will return an award I received from the SPJ for investigative journalism if they go ahead with this disgraceful decision, and I will appeal to other colleagues who have been honored by the SPJ to do the same.

Rather than have this Board--hardly representative of all journalists--pronounce on Helen Thomas's integrity, I would suggest a referendum open to all journalists and slightly broader.

Let's ask America's journalists if they sided with Helen Thomas when, practically alone, and when it mattered, she challenged the claims of the Bush White House on WMD's or now back Ari Fleisher, the then Press Secretary, who has called for these sanctions against the far more honest and gutsy Thomas?

How many journalists are proud of way mainstream journalism became another kind of SPJ in that period--a SOCIETY OR PROFESSIONAL JINGOISTS?

How many journalists today believe that journalists are somehow forbidden from having opinions on the settlement practices in Israel that have been condemned for years by UN resolutions and editorials in newspapers throughout the world?

Have we lost that "decent respect for the opinions of mankind" called for in our Declaration of Independence?

Are we only allowed to believe and parrot the views of the Israeli government with its super thin majority, or the powerful Lobby it coordinates and helps fund?

Why all the silence?

Contrast our "journalism" on this subject with what appears in the media worldwide.

Who will history honor, the likes of Judith Miller or Helen Thomas?

William Shanley, who is making a film about Helen's career, commented:

"Pathetic. America has become a country in which a thief is on the cover of

Time Magazine, the Golden Rule is under the boot of empire and the truth about the illegal occupation of Palestine, the theft of land and the mass incarceration of its people, cannot pass lips.”

The other point is that Helen is now a commentator and has been for ten years that frees her from the demands of “objectivity.”

And where was the SPJ when CNN Walter Isaacson ordered newsrooms to not show the effects of US bombing in Afghanistan? Did the SPJ speak out against this outrageous suspension of standard journalistic practice?”

Let the SPJ know how you feel about this continuing persecution of Helen Thomas. Call Habit Limor, SPJ President at 513-852-4012, or write hlimor@spj.org

Speak up now so that all the Helen Thomas’ of the world can speak up and speak out without fear and retribution.

Update: In March 2012, Helen Thomas, a founder of the White House Correspondents Association asked her colleagues if she could buy a table for a “farewell dinner” at the Association’s annual celebrity rich event. Her request was rejected and she was told she could only buy two tickets.

24. SPIRITUALITY AND THE MEDIA: CHALLENGING THE SPIRITUAL COMMUNITY

Spirit is a funny word.

It is used in so many ways: spirit as noun and spirit as verb.

There's the spirit within and the spirit of an age, the spirit that conjures up mysteries and a spirit within history. There's team spirit and an unbottleable essence that leads to one being called spirited. There is the spirit of skepticism and a spirit of faith.

Journalists like me work in a world that is often spiritless, a world that claims to chase "objective" reality, a world of facts and opinions on the plains of politics, and power and observable events. We are taught to be analytical, to distrust the unseen, the vague, the unverified and unverifiable. We keep a distance from spiritual issues because they seem too cosmic even kooky.

Yet at the same time, journalists know that religious ideas and leaders move millions.

They also know that deep down a spirit animates their work along with the sense of professional duty and responsibility. We debate ethics endlessly and often speak in terms of the values that motivate us. The outrage and self-searching during the recent scandal at the New York Times shows how earnest, even devout, journalists can be about first principles including getting it right and not making it up.

In the early years of the last century, an editor of the Denver Republican spoke of his newspaper as a "serious sacred business. The least smell of corruption, fear or favoritism must not creep into its news columns."

Lou Cannon, considered the "dean" of all political reporters writes that this value itself can lead to a harmful attitude. "The reporters view that he is performing a sacred calling can cloak him (forgive this gender specificity, please) with an annoying self-righteousness about his mission which ordinary Americans find disturbing."

Disturbing or not, I know that my career, now in its fourth decade, was

influenced by spiritual influences and teachers that I didn't always realize had so deeply infiltrated my own thinking and worldview. My mother was one of them, a poet by calling. My dad used a Yiddish phrase 'a "luft mensch"—a person of the air—to describe her. She was driven by an inner morality and a love of nature. She saw a goodness in things, in people—not in religious icons. My world as a child was surrounded by a cohesive Jewish community bound by social values and the thinking of prophets and artists.

As I emerged into the larger world, the world merged into me in the early 60's when the civil rights movement rang an alarm bell in my soul. I met and marched with Martin Luther King Jr, and found myself a Jewish kid from a Bronx working class family learning about this "little light of mine" from the gospel-influenced Churches in the Deep South. My own sense of faith was first belted in the Bible belt. I met saints like voter registration guru Bob Moses in Mississippi and discovered the need to change America with the spirit of non-violent resistance. Later, I was mesmerized by and befriended Malcolm X, the first Muslim I had really known and leaned about Allah, the beneficent, the merciful. I watched his political rollercoaster ride from a racist cult to an apostle of universal human rights. We joked around so much that he at one point called me Danny X.

In college, I published a magazine called Dialogue under the auspices of Cornell's United Religious Work and saw how people could work together on an interfaith basis. In the years since, I frequently reported up close and personal on people whose spirit moved the world—Nelson Mandela, Jesse Jackson, Elie Wiesel, Li Hongzhi and the Dalai Lama along with a small army of human rights heroes whose courage inspired millions.

Our company, Globalvision has produced programs with indigenous peoples in Brazil, The Temple of Understanding in New York, The Museum of World Religions in Taiwan, Agon Shu in Japan and Falun Gong in China. We have learned that all of these separate traditions have common roots and aspirations. We also debunked movements like the Reverend Moon's Unification Church and phony psychics and abusive cults.

I can tell many stories about our interactions but the main one is that all of these people and movements projected a charisma and insight that elevated discourse and challenged us on the personal level as well as the political one. They are all multi-dimensional.

Sadly, the spirit and challenges that these prophetic voices represent rarely penetrate the insulated world of media. There alas, most who sense a sacredness of mission or deeper calling or duty are too often sacrificed on the altar of media as big business with corporate agendas trumping democratic ones. Years ago, the great Edward R Murrow saw it coming when he warned, “economics and editorial judgment are in conflict. And there is no law which says that dollars will be defeated by duty.”

Put another way in the words of Paul McCartney, we all live in a material world. And that world is not always kind to spiritual pursuits or asking deeper questions that leave the material plane. The pressures in the news business are to get along by going along, to fit into the formats and formulas that seem to be selling if not always telling the truth.

Many of my colleagues fear that journalism itself may be on the way out as “reality” television merges fiction and “faction.” The coverage of the Iraq war that I have documented in the book (*Embedded: Weapons of Mass Deception—How the Media Failed to Cover the War on Iraq*) shows how jingoism and packaging diluted real journalism as channels competed with each other over which could be more ‘patriotically correct.’

Today drama and storytelling has a bigger impact than hard news reporting. It is for that reason that news biz has been infiltrated so thoroughly by show biz technique. Infotainment is so ensconced that even the coverage of elections and war are talked about as “electotainment” and “militainment.”

This has contributed to somewhat of a spiritual crisis within the media industry itself. A study found deep dissatisfaction within journalism with as many as 70% of media workers questioning the meaning of their work and often its honesty. This conflict reflects the tension between a market driven enterprise and its façade of public interest orientation. Bear in mind that the media is the only industry in America that enjoys a constitutional protection because the nation’s founders believed deeply in the value of a free press.

Those of us who do want to see more diverse perspectives on the air and in the media have to become advocates. Many of us start out thinking that the media is here to spotlight the real crises and problems of the world, and slowly realize that the media is one of those problems. That is a realization we all have to act upon.

I edit Medichannel.org, the world's largest online media issues network. We have over a thousand affiliates and many mirror and echo the growing critique of the media system. We look back with nostalgia on the thirtieth anniversary of the Watergate investigations and the Pentagon Papers disclosures and the media fight for their publication aware of how the Bush Administration is often given reverential and uncritical coverage.

At the same time, the spiritual community that has grown up with so many of its media outlets seems rather disengaged when it comes to being concerned about our media system and lobbying for better coverage of the issues that it feels strongly about—issues of a culture of peace, social consciousness, socially responsible business, alternative treatments, personal transformation, mind-body medicine, protection of indigenous cultures, respect for diverse ideas, interest in the great though traditions and the like.

Many spiritual movements have been content to function as subcultures on the margins when many of the ideas they champion have the support of majorities. Perhaps it's because of depoliticalization or just a lack of awareness about the importance of encouraging media industries to be more accountable and responsible.

Perhaps that's because the crassness and commercialism of our TV system is such a tune-out to folks driven by deeper values. But we can't afford to drop out and disconnect ourselves with the cultural landscape that has such a big effect on our country.

Sometimes I think that some in the 'spiritual community' cling to their ideas as kids hold on to protective blankets perhaps out of a fear or rejection or an unwillingness to try to mainstream them. This can contribute to a spirit of elitism and monasticism.

"We cannot escape the media," insists Roger Silverstone who runs the media program at the London School of Economics. "They are involved in every aspect of our everyday lives."

As a TV producer who has tried to place programs on spiritual themes on TV networks, I can confirm that many gatekeepers have closed the gate to many of them even when bestselling authors and big names are involved. PBS for example doesn't mind having Deepak Chopra produce programming that

can be used to generate donations for public television, but he has yet to have his own series. The Discovery channel also does not appear to be too eager to allow its viewers to discover the issues that spiritually minded people care deeply about on any regular basis.

At the same time, persistence can produce results. Despite snickering in some media circles, I was able to produce a show on China's Falun Gong spiritual practice, as well as programs with Elie Wiesel, Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela and the Dalai Lama. There are openings if we have the courage to pursue them.

If we want a say, we will have to "pay"—to put our money and energy where our values and interests are. Look at the power of rightwing religious broadcasting. No, don't look away. How did they do it? What can we learn from their presence and impact?

Where are the voices on the other side of the spectrum? Where are our channels? Are we not as smart, or are we afraid to show the world who we are as people and why our ideas matter? We ignore these issues at our peril.

I am writing to communicate. To encourage thinking and acting. Are you listening?

25. WHERE IS AIDS AMONG THE A-LIST TOPICS?

When two stories collide, one gives way until the networks realize they can split the screen more and more, so you can glimpse all the big stories at the same time, the better to distract us and limit our attention spans. Increasingly, front-page attention is stuck on stories starting with A: Arms. Al-Qaeda. Ashcroft. Annan. Arafat. Arthur Anderson. Anthrax. Afghanistan. But one A is, for the most part, missing: AIDS. That omission says a lot about the state of the world and the world of news.

Ted Koppel Rediscovered Africa

In mid-January, just to show that another A (Africa) could be covered, Nightline's Ted Koppel highlighted stories that had been swallowed up by yet another A: amnesia (i.e., the tendency by news organizations to forget that Africa exists). For five nights, he showed that a forgotten corner of the world could be covered on television, and covered well. I didn't always like the analytical overlay, especially on a moving profile of a desperately poor woman in the Congo that cited Greek mythology to compare her to Sisyphus forever pushing a rock up a hill, with a strong subtext of "the poor shall always be with us" fatalism. But at a time when most of the developing world goes uncovered on TV, it was an impressive demonstration of caring and daring.

But what if you feel that the African AIDS story needs to be told but in a different way, through the eyes and voices of African youth — the group that is most at risk? Notes UNAIDS, the organization leading the global fight: "Children and young people are at the center of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The extent to which their rights are protected, the services and information they receive and the behavior of young people can help determine the quality of life of millions of people. Young people are particularly susceptible to HIV infection and they also carry the burden of caring for family members living with HIV/AIDS."

According to the UN, AIDS has killed 25 million people since the early 1980s, and as many as 8,000 die every day around the globe. Fully 40 million are infected, and an estimated 14,000 people are added to that number every day. Yet as AIDS claims more victims, it gets less coverage. On January 25, The New York Times carried a Reuter's story reporting,

“AIDS will surpass the Black Death as the world’s worst pandemic if the 40 million people living with HIV/AIDS do not get life-prolonging drugs, a public health physician said Friday.”

One World’s new on-line AIDS Channel (www.aidschannel.org) notes that many of the promised contributions to a global AIDS fund have not come through. Writing from Zambia, in the epicenter of the epidemic, Catherine Ndashe Phiri, the AIDS channel’s editor, writes that the war on terrorism “slowed the renewed commitment from the June UNGASS on AIDS [UN General Assembly Special Session on HIV/AIDS] for the end of global AIDS... AIDS was once again put on the backbench, and undoubtedly it will be felt largely by Africa and other developing nations.”

When AIDS isn’t visible in the media, it doesn’t exist for communities that rely on media to tell them what matters most. This is true not only in the West, but in Africa itself, where stigma and discrimination against AIDS sufferers is deeply entrenched, and where silence and denial still drive many governments to cover up their frightening infection levels. Often the young people who most need to know how to protect themselves have few programs directed their way. At the same time, there are many stirring and effective responses led by unsung young heroes whose stories could inspire a greater youth mobilization.

But who is going to tell these stories?

Speak Up Young Africa!

Two young medical students, Kebba Jobarteh from Gambia and Nduka Amankulor from Nigeria, who went to Yale and received public health training at Harvard, found that many people in the West took a rather paternalistic approach, the mindset of medical missionaries who don’t really respect or support initiatives underway in Africa at the community level. “We looked around and realized that most of our colleagues knew very little about our world, customs and concerns. They couldn’t really speak to African youth, or for that matter, encourage young people to speak for themselves,” Kebba told me when he approached Globalvision to help fashion a media project with a film, web component and youth network to showcase what Africans themselves are doing about AIDS.

“We are calling it “Speak Up Young Africa,” adds Nduka, “because we

know how ineffective most anti-AIDS programming is because it talks down to young people in boring and uninspired ways.” With a small research grant, these passionate doctors-to-be jumped in with both feet. They spent two months crisscrossing the continent talking with youth groups, medical colleagues and extraordinary individuals whose stories can become components of the film they insist needs to be made.

“There is nothing out there like what we want to do--media with youth for youth,” Kebba insists. “Who better to help tell this story than us? We know the medical dimension, understand the cultural challenges and relate quite personally to what African youth are going through because that’s who we are.”

Funds Needed For Anti-AIDS Media

Now their big challenge begins — to find the resources to produce the project. They have an advisory board that reads like a Who’s Who of AIDS experts. And they have going for them at least six C’s: charisma, consciousness, contacts, competence, commitment and caring. Only one C is still a bit light: cash.

A lot of money earmarked to fight AIDS in Africa is sloshing around the world. Much of it is spent on research institutes in the North, on conferences and meetings of experts. Some of it is ripped off by corrupt governments or ends up in the coffers of wealthy pharmaceutical companies. Talk to people in the field and they will tell you about waste and misplaced priorities. Travel to infected communities and you hear complaints not just about the lack of access to vital high-priced medicines but about the unavailability of basic care, even aspirins.

Precious little is being invested in media projects that can inform young people in a language they can relate to, produced by people who connect with their pain and aspirations. Already “Speak Up Young Africa” has been spoken down to by some TV outlets and funding agencies. A few cop out by saying “Not for us” or “We don’t fund media.” But they didn’t ignore September 11, and they must not be allowed to ignore AIDS.

“Speak Up Young Africa” will get made somehow. I am going to help these multilingual, multitalented young men with the smarts to survive in two very different cultures, and I am sure others will too. I am sure there are

funders who will get its significance and potential.

A project like theirs is vital, given the basic indifference of many media gatekeepers who keep Americans under informed about Africa and AIDS. This is not a conspiracy by the news business, by the way, just a reflection of its market-driven culture and often parochial focus. That needs to be challenged both with documentation of the gaps and criticism of errors and omissions on the one hand, and with engaged independent media on the other.

Ted Koppel titled his last report from the Congo “Heart of Darkness.” But as has been said before, the only thing dark about Africa is our ignorance of it. We all need to open our hearts to let the ignorance out and pump the light of empathy and compassion in.

26. AL JAZEERA TAKES ON THE WORLD — IN ENGLISH

As they say when the Olympics convene, “Let the Games Begin.” A new Olympics gets underway today, the news Olympics, as the Anglo-American hegemony of the big news cartels has for the first time a challenger in the form of well-packaged professional network. Al Jazeera goes on the air globally in English (but not yet in the USA) to offer another perspective.

The Arabic language news channel that revolutionized news in the Arab World has just marked its tenth anniversary and become once again the world’s fifth top known brand.

Al Jazeera marks the occasion with the launch of channel in English (not just a translation of the original) with a sports channel, documentary channel and their own CSPAN type special events channel.

For now, the rest of the world will be watching but not the American people. Why can’t the heavily monopolized cable industry find any room in their multi-channel universe for the new kid on the block? Is it political? Yes, in part, but beyond that broadcasters know how critical so many Americans are of the news goo on the air and might leap to an attractive alternative. Is it any surprise than the industry that keeps blathering on about free choice denies it to a foreign-based competitor even as the US networks long ago went global? While they condemn others blocking their access to overseas markets, they shamelessly block others here. (COMCAST said it had a “lack of capacity!”)

Time Magazine, part of the Time Warner empire that also runs CNN spoke with Wadah Khanfar, the journalist turned the original news executive running all of Al Jazeera: Their piece is titled, what else, “The Al Jazeera Invasion.” Their website carries an ad for a show on “The Extremist Agenda” by CNN’s hard right wanker Glen Beck (later at Fox and then on his own!) This is a form of hidden hostility packaged as objective journalism:

TIME: What is the purpose of Al Jazeera English?

Wadah Khanfar: A Jazeera is the only international network that is based in the developing world, and that will be the departure point for the

English channel. I am not speaking about the geographical south, but the cultural, social and political south. The ‘south’ has not been presented in the international media properly. Why? Because most of the international media organizations are centered in the West. We would like to present a new model. We will take the south into consideration. We will cover the world, but will take the south as a departure point and a priority.

TIME: What does that mean?

Khanfar: When an international news organization covers a story in Somalia, Yemen, Sudan or wherever, they will fly a crew to go there, spend a few days, interact with some officials and analysts, most of the time English-speaking elite, and file the story and go home. At Al Jazeera, we are getting our local Somalis, Yemenis and Sudanese, local correspondents from within the society, who understand much better than the people who come from overseas. We will get a much better insight....”

There has been widespread fear and loathing of Al Jazeera often led by people who never watched it or couldn’t understand it if they could. A campaign of disinformation orchestrated by the Pentagon, and regurgitated by many media outlets has sought to discredit the channel as “Terrorist TV.”

The Al Jazeera office in Kabul and Baghdad were bombed by US jets. An Al Jazeera journalist is being held at Guantanamo without charge. (He has since been freed after years of campaigns for his release!) There were reports that President Bush and Tony Blair discussed bombing the station’s headquarters in Doha. Documents of their conversations have not been released.

Despite all this, Al Jazeera has hired an international team with many recognized and respected journalists including Dave Marash who worked at ABC News for years. One of their biggest catches was Sir David Frost, the world famous interviewer. He told the Guardian that he was initially nervous about signing on:

“Sir David Frost has revealed how he investigated Al-Jazeera’s credentials with his own high-level contacts in Whitehall and Washington before agreeing to sign up to its long-delayed English language channel, which launches today.

“In an interview in today’s GO, Sir David, who is scheduled to welcome Tony Blair as the first guest to his show on Friday, said he initially had qualms about signing for the broadcaster after trenchant criticism from the American right.

“So I deliberately checked out, with Whitehall and with Washington, that there were no links with al-Qaida, for instance, that sort of thing,” he said. “And it was not really a surprise that there were no such links, because Qatar, the proprietor of al-Jazeera, is also our most important ally in the Middle East.”

The Guardian newspaper did more than carry these interviews. They praised Al Jazeera in an editorial: “Just as British reports have their biases, as a new study on the Iraq war underlines, so al-Jazeera has its own. But by reporting inconvenient facts and airing diverse views, it has helped the Arab region. By offering a new slant, it will do good for the wider world too.”

Here in the USA, we need viewers to demand that Al Jazeera English be shown the way an earlier generation of cable viewers supported the “I want my MTV” campaigns. It is essential that Americans be exposed to other points of view and information missing in our media system because of media concentration and manipulation. It’s time we were allowed to tune in the world.

Let’s give the new channel a chance while we fight for our freedom of choice.

CULTURAL COVERAGE

27. WHY ARE THE GRAMMY'S BACKTRACKING ON DIVERSITY?

LL “Cool J” will be solo-hosting the annual Grammy Awards this Sunday, February 12th, in Los Angeles. The rap veteran who also just happens to have a show on CBS also just happens to be the star that his network has chosen for maximum prime time ‘face time,’ the kind of cross promotional showcase that every network loves for “their” talent.

LL speaks of his role on what’s called “Music’s Biggest Night” as a “thrill” and a “dream come true.”

What he doesn’t reflect on was his own past: the year he boycotted the ceremony because it wasn’t honoring rap artists in the days before rap became a best-selling commercial music.

Ironically, LL Cool J is now the front man for a TV extravaganza that other artists are slamming for excluding major American music traditions as part of what they picture as a further corporate takeover of the music business.

Just as the dominant power of corporate power in politics is being challenged by movements like Occupy Wall Street, the re-engineering of the awards by a still secret committee without a vote by musicians is being criticized as discriminatory and anti-democratic.

More significantly, the fact that the awards are being presented by the CBS Television network; there has been little TV coverage of the controversy that surrounds it.

The top executive of the Grammy’s, Neil Portnow seems to be there please advertisers by streamlining the ceremony, to quicken its pace, and keep the focus on the biggest stars and most popular best-selling genres.

He presided over the dropping of 31 categories of music, including those that most appeal to minorities, in essence, eroding the cultural diversity that has always been a selling point for NARAS, the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences.

Some of these categories include: Latin Jazz, Traditional and Contemporary

Blues, Hawaiian, Mexican Norteña, Polka. Native American, R & B, Gospel, Traditional and Contemporary Jazz and Cajun/Zydeco.

Neil Portnow, CEO of the Recording Academy, doesn't seem to appreciate the political and cultural dimensions of this controversy. He has been unresponsive to calls to reinstate the deleted categories.

He confessed to Billboard that there really was no rhyme or reason for blowing up the awards into a daylong extravaganza, recognizing more than 100 categories (109 in 2011):

“Every year there are changes but we’ve never ... stopped and stepped back to look at the whole thing,” Portnow told Billboard in an exclusive interview. “[We asked], is there an underlying infrastructure and rationale across all the awards as to how we’re doing this? And what we found, is there wasn’t.”

So they have created one by dumping the music that many artists struggled for decades to win recognition for.

Visibility for these genres introduces diverse music to viewers and helps the careers of less well-known artists.

One of American's best known singers, Frank Sinatra, an early Grammy winner said at the first Grammy ceremony that he believed in the awards because they were about musical excellence, not popularity (or sales.)

Say the critics: “NARAS President Neil Portnow made a shocking surprise announcement to the organization's more than 21,000 members: The Academy had eliminated nearly one-third of its categories, thereby decreasing the number of 2012 Grammy Awards from 109 to 78.

The decision by NARAS greatly reduces the chances of artists composing, arranging and performing music in those categories to win the music industry's most coveted award – The Grammy.

NARAS, the producers of the Grammys, made the decision to eliminate these categories, comprised mostly of ethnic music, without the knowledge of or input from the organization's 21,000 members or its elected representatives; and, in so doing and by failing to apply the new eligibility criteria in a non-

discriminatory manner, violated NARAS' own bylaws and procedures.“

Some Latin Jazz artists are suing while more than 23000 people have signed a protest petition at the GrammyWatch.org website. Grammy Watch, with support from Presente.org, the largest online Latino advocacy organization in the United States, is protesting.

Prominent stars like Grammy winner Carlos Santana supports the call to reinstate the categories.

Reuter's reports, “Paul Simon, Bonnie Raitt and Bobby Sanabria are among the dozens of artists who have spoken out against the decision. Musicians say the Grammy cuts will harm their careers financially and diminish the profile of music enjoyed by minority communities.

Spokesman Robert Sax said on Wednesday that the protest would be held outside the Staples Center in Los Angeles as stars like Rihanna, Bruce Springsteen, The Beach Boys and Tony Bennett arrive to perform at the Grammy Awards show on Sunday.

The demonstrators will later celebrate the Not Those Awards All-Star Latin Jazz Jam at Mama Juana's, a Los Angeles nightclub, with performers including two-time Grammy winner Oscar Hernandez, John Santos and Bobby Matos.”

Black political figures like Dr. Cornell West and Reverend Jesse Jackson have supported the protesters. Yahoo reports: “Jackson, on behalf of the Rainbow Push Coalition of U.S. civil rights groups, said some of the categories dropped by the Recording Academy in a major overhaul last year “constitute the very heart of the music that nourishes and inspires minority communities.”

While some are getting hot under the collar, LL Cool J has stayed cool. He was told of the protest, but has yet to comment on it, along with CBS and the Grammy sponsors.

Why let ethics get in the way of a successful apolitical star-studded telecast?

They didn't.

28. ASSESSING BARACK OBAMA'S STRESS TEST AFTER 100 DAYS IN OFFICE

How would you do on a “stress test?” As the soundness of banks is measured—with many expected to show signs of insolvency---the whole concept demands a broader focus.

How many of the as many as 20 million Americans out of work could pass a stress test, in flying colors, how many in the millions of families facing foreclosure, or the students defaulting on student loans? What about the reported 31 million maxed out on their credit cards, or the many million more bombarded with “debt consolidation” commercials on their cable TV channels at 3 AM when so many anxious people watch because they can’t sleep.”

Ours has become a stressed nation being asked to assess the impact of the first 100 days of the Obama era. The President is coping with his own stress test. He is already at war, first with the high expectations he himself raised, and at war with an increasingly vicious and contentious right wing media that is turning its viewers into troops for an uprising against his “tyranny.

I just returned from the Eurasian Media Forum in Kazakhstan where I challenged Republican Party Chairman Michael Steele on the bitter partisan rhetoric regurgitated annually on Fox News and that he has reinforced and not distanced his party from. He compared GOP attacks on Obama to what he considered far more extreme condemnations of President Bush “by the left.” He compared himself to Barack Obama as the second most important black male in the country and suggested that the elections in 2010 will go against the Democrats because he believes their policies will fail.

He is cocky and clever---but is he right?

It is certainly true that the bailout plans initiated by his predecessor—and which he supported as a Democratic candidate has in effect continued but has yet to “fix” anything. You can argue that the “glimmers” of prosperity he identified to stir confidence are an illusion and that the depression that many are already experiencing can and will get worse.

Obama is a pragmatist talking left one day and moving right the next. This

is called “pragmatism.” He has already compromised some of his reforms and every welcome initiative like the disclosure of those Bush torture memos. He kowtowed to the CIA and has now killed the idea of a Truth Commission let alone anyone compare these United States to despotic days in Chile, Argentina or South Africa. Unfortunately, this shuffle is hard for many of his most passionate backers to take and does not build trust and confidence.

Back at the international forum, Obama was still regarded with a sense of hope and relief by a word weary of the Bush order. Yet, on issue after issue, there was uncertainty on where he stands. Will he press Israel to push forward with some peace deal? Will he free himself from the grip of the Lobby, and take new initiatives or will we see more of the same equivocating that has ignored Israeli settlements and occupation? It may be significant that Secretary of State Clinton is proposing to recognize the reality of Hamas popularity among Israel's, I was struck to hear China's brilliant Victor Gao insist that justice for Palestine including Gaza are more important for America's prestige in the world than what happens in Afghanistan.

Will ever withdraw from Iraq? Bush's former ambassador says he is still trying to be “helpful” in Iraq and Afghanistan where he served, and as he told me was shot out frequently (“I lost several helicopters”) and was preoccupied with defending the Green Zone against frequent shelling by the Iraqi resistance.” An Iraqi Kurdish leader told me Obama is moving slowly and “responsibly.” That “responsibility” is seen as an excuse from anti-war activists who rallied to Obama as a delay to please the military.

A recent report in the Financial Times that surveyed the global down turn had one upbeat piece---a report on how well arms contractors are doing.

The Russians at the Conference welcomed Obama's rapprochement with their President and like his proposal for a phase out of nuclear weapons but so far see backtracking on backing human rights there and in China. There is still a lot of anger at America going back to “the fall of communism” which included the pillage of many of Russia's resources by American companies on a destroy and conquer mission.

Journalists are by nature skeptics and cynical but many there were so relieved that the US pushed “the reset” button in a phrase used by ex

Congressman Harold Ford Jr. from Tennessee, not head of the centrist Democratic Leadership Conference Ford backs Barrack but is also stressed by all the economic uncertainty. The DLC has a crisis too because it has consistently stressed free market pro-corporate policies. Many of them were complicit in the collapse we are experienced so they are now operating as a “think tank” to come up with new solutions.

Later this week, you will hear endless punditry in attempts to offer a “report card” on the first 100 days. A lot of it will be partisan and a lot of it will be wrong. There will be little reference to the bureaucratic and political delays in staffing up Government agencies including the Treasury despite the fact that we are in a major crisis. That doesn’t seem to matter to those who oversee the protocols of Congressional approval.

As the man at the top, Obama needs a team in place to make things happen. He can’t use a phrase employed by an innovative journalist on a panel on the media. The acronym is JFDI—“just fucking do it.” So everything internally is moving in slomo speed while everyone on the outside expects solutions at hyperspeed.

The media can be unforgiving and quick to judge but the public seems more aware of how deep the challenge is. So far, the President’s approval rating is up. My colleague DXM tells me that for the first time in the years he has been watching, Barack replaced singer Britney Spears as the most searched after on the Internet. Mr. Obama, however, finished second. The number one name on this hit parade is another Obama, the one named Michelle.

EPILOGUE: WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

29. DECLARATION OF MEDIA INDEPENDENCE

Two documents from historic and successful struggles for democracy have helped me frame my thinking on media independence. One was our own Declaration of Independence, the seminal statement of the American Revolution that gave the grievances of a colonized people eloquent expression. The other, from the modern era, was South Africa's Freedom Charter, adopted at a Congress of the People in 1955, a clarion call for justice that outlined a vision and the principles for a post-apartheid society. Both documents defined in their times and lands what was wrong, and pointed to what needed doing.

So, with a little creative borrowing, I drafted such a document for adoption by the 1996 Congress of Media and Democracy, which appeared in the Congress's final report. I include it here with no pretensions to literary originality, as a working draft for readers to react to, revise, and, hopefully, in part or in its entirety, to put to use.

We declare before our country and the world that the giant media combines who put profit before the public interest do not speak for us. We proclaim this democratic media charter and pledge ourselves to work tirelessly until its goals have been achieved. We urge all Americans of good will, and people throughout the world who want to participate in a new democratic information order, to join with us.

We call upon our colleagues, readers, editors, and audiences to inform themselves and the American people about the dangers posed by the concentration of media power into fewer and fewer hands. We urge that more airtime and news stories be devoted to a critical examination of the relationship between media monopolies and the threat they pose to the spirit and functioning of the first amendment. We cannot have a meaningful democracy unless our media institutions provide reportage, in-depth programming and coverage that reflect a more diverse range of sources and opinions.

We urge our elected representatives to challenge excessive and concentrated media power because it poses a threat to the future of democracy.

We call for an end to all legislation that promotes censorship and corporate

practices that lead to self-censorship. We need government to regulate media monopolies in the public interest and to keep our news media and new electronic information highway open and free of the undue and repressive influence of government bureaucrats, excessive corporate branding, and one-note political agendas.

We urge non-governmental groups, advocacy organizations, labor unions, community groups, and all environmental and social justice organizations to make common cause with us in fighting to create more points of access and accountability in our media system; we urge all citizens to interact more with the media in their own communities by monitoring performance, writing letters, calling talk shows, and meeting editors and radio and TV executives.

We are against techno-solutions like the V Chip—and call instead for a “D Chip,” a commitment to use media to promote the values of Democracy.

We want more than ritualized, look-alike and think-alike coverage of elections. We want more coverage of citizen participation in civil society, political movements, non-governmental organizations, and community groups. We share the concerns of many parents with the overload of shows that glamorize violence and cheapen sex.

We demand that media institutions in our society increase the participation of minorities and women in all positions in their organizations. Our newsrooms have to stop being among the most segregated institutions in our country. Racism inside the media contributes to the toleration of racism in the culture at large. We urge news organizations to openly audit their performance in this regard and publicize the results.

We further pledge to join and support efforts to stop attacks on labor unions in our media institutions. Media workers must be guaranteed the right to collective bargaining, and to belong to unions if they so choose.

We call on media companies to reduce the growing internal gap between salaries at the top and salaries at the bottom. Fairness and equity in the media workplace is essential.

“We call upon media institutions to explore the values and practices of ‘public journalism’ so that the media can begin to better serve the needs

of the people. We urge them to adopt codes of conduct that rebuild their credibility in the eyes of a public grown cynical, which no longer trusts the media. We call upon the media to promote tolerance and equality in American life.

We call upon U.S.-based multi-national media companies who already generate more than half of their revenues outside the United States to act responsibly in trading with the nations of the world. Many nations already resent the dumping of American programming, however popular it may be in the short run, into their countries. Others deserve a chance to sell as well as buy programming, to have their voices and concerns heard too. They have the means of production but lack the means of distribution. We oppose the growth of a new “electronic colonial-ism.” We want more global sharing of cultures and viewpoints.

We call upon the governments of the world to respect the rights of journalists—which are in danger in many countries—and the right of the people to read and see their reports.

We call for more public funding of the arts and humanities, including documentary programming. We want America to allocate as much money proportionately to support the arts and humanities as countries like Canada, Germany, and England do. We have the money, let us find the will.

We want to put the public back into public broadcasting and create mechanisms for accountability that bring PBS back to its original mandate to provide programming not available on the commercial spectrum. We want to stop the give-away of the public airwaves and the broadcast spectrum itself.

The income from spectrum sales should be set aside for public media. The corporate media sector should be taxed to help subsidize the public media so that the notion of the “free marketplace of ideas” has meaning once again.

Private companies can lease the airwaves, not own them.

We pledge ourselves to working cooperatively and collaboratively to help bring the media more in line with the values of democracy.

We ask all who share our goals to embrace this declaration and agree to work on behalf of its tenets so that the principles of freedom of the press, which have given America such a distinctive place among nations, will not be compromised and denied because a handful of huge companies and media moguls are in a position to dictate what our country sees, hears, reads and, ultimately, thinks.

30. CLOSING THOUGHTS 2012

That statement, old as it is, is still a good start for a crusade for media reform and integrity.

I am still willing to tweet it.

But, fifteen years later, I realize that activists and journalists have all too little leverage with the media combine. It has become more powerful than ever, with many “friends” in Congress who do its bidding because of the political contributions the industry showers on members of key committees. That industry has been pursuing a deregulation agenda—in finance, on the corporate front and when it comes to media. It seems untouchable!

It’s a tough fight to take on such a many-headed monster, but if our democracy is to survive, we – those of us who are conscious of the media as a problem ---, need to think about what to do and how to do it.

Clearly, the media environment has changed dramatically in the last fifteen years with the mainstream media loosing much of its legitimacy—and with the new social media providing millions of people with the opportunity to communicate with each other and circulate news and views.

That’s a subject for a new book, that is, if people are still reading books by the time I get around to write that one.

As of now, I am still dissecting after all these years, knowing that the impact is not what I hoped, but my sense of political, and yes, “patriotic duty” drives me on.

Your comments welcome:

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Visit Mediachannel1.Org and the News Dissector blog at newsdissector.net

DISSECTING THE NEWS & LIGHTING THE FUSE

DISPATCHES FROM THE MEDIA WAR

Photograph: Sammie Amachree



Danny Schechter is known as "The News Dissector." He's been strutting his media stuff in print, on radio, on TV and in his own films for decades. "Dissecting The News & Lighting The Fuse" follows up on his investigative work in journalism, updates earlier books and features essays and articles that appeared in blogs, other writer's books and magazines.

He has degrees from Cornell University and the London School of Economics, and an honorary Ph.D from Fitchburg College. He taught at Harvard, The New School and the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism.

He blogs at Newsdissector.net, writes for AlJazeera English and other well known websites. He lives in Chelsea in New York City in a loft with 7000 record albums, a treasure trove of memorabilia and a computer that is running out of memory. Danny can be reached at dissector@mediachannel.org.

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