

**JANUARY 28**

# The State of the Media Union

**M**y fellow American media consumers:

At a time when news cycles bring us such portentous events as the remarkable wedding of Britney Spears, the advent of Michael Jackson's actual trial proceedings and the start of the Democratic presidential primaries, it is time to reflect upon the state of the media union.

The achievements are everywhere to be seen and heard.

On more than a thousand radio stations owned by the Clear Channel conglomerate, the programming quality is as reliable as a Big Mac.

In cities and towns across the nation, an array of outspoken radio talk-show hosts can be depended on to run the gamut from the mushy center to the far right.

Television provides a wide variety of homogenized offerings. With truly impressive (production) values, the major networks embody a consummate multiplicity of sameness, with truncated imagination and consolidated ownership. These days, there's a captivatingly unadventurous cable channel for virtually every niche market.

A few naysayers like to disparage our system of mass communications. Yet overall, modern free-enterprise media outlets are the best that money can buy.

In 2004, those who scoff at the transcendent future of new media technologies are like those who greeted television several decades ago with cries of "idiot box" and "vast wasteland." The cynics failed to trust those who would be enriched by the emerging medium.

Today, let us not be bound by old concepts of national boundaries. The global village is being wired with fiber optics; the power to consume is now in the hands of billions.

In an era of international understanding — when everyone from Peoria to Belgrade to Beijing knows the meaning of golden arches or a Nike-brand swoosh — commercial expression has become a kind of global lexicon in a language gradually redefining what it means to be human. For the 21st century, from one shining sea to another, a manifest corporate destiny is upon us.

Leaving no pixel unturned, entrepreneurial genius has found endless ways to

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innovate on behalf of the eternal quest for more capital. Just as the highest monetary achievers among us have learned to seem to do good while doing extraordinarily well for themselves, the TV networks teach us that the most pristine values are to be achieved by, not coincidentally, spending money. Every priceless moment, as MasterCard commercials have often reminded us, somehow seems to coincide with financial expenditures.

To better live in a society that treasures individuality, you can learn how to be more in step with everyone else who matters. Glancing at a TV screen for scarcely more than a second, you have the potential to absorb the latest data from key stock-market indicators as well as glimpse snippets of headlines crawling across the bottom of the screen, absorb computer-generated graphics, listen to voices, hear background music – and, of course, keep an eye on the big picture.

But with all media privileges, my fellow American consumers, come responsibilities. Some technologies are being abused to bypass commercials on television, suppress pop-up ads on line and resist legitimate efforts by sponsors to replace your unduly iconoclastic sense of reality with lucrative facades.

Yet let us be candid. The legends of corporate-driven community, laid down by conventions of commerce and politics, are suitable for compliance with never-never lands of public pretense. Contrived narratives that provide maximum profits can have little to do with authentic experience. To guide the expenditures of time and resources for enhancement of cash flow, our powerful institutions must function as arbiters of social meaning.

First among equals of those institutions are the powerhouses of mass media. As Marshall McLuhan observed, "All media exist to invest our lives with artificial perceptions and arbitrary values."

These are revolutionary times, media outlets often remind us. All over the planet, mass marketing boosts cultural products to digitize the future. In the binary mode, you're either with it or you're not. Media consumers of the world, unite! You have nothing to lose but your brains.