

# Whither media reform?

**By Danny Schechter**

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**L**eave it to Eric Idle of Monty Python to bring the FCC back into public view. He has written a catchy anti-FCC ditty and put it up on his Pythonline.com website where it quickly has become an underground classic. Idle explains with tongue in cheek: “Here’s a little song I wrote the other day while I was out duck hunting with a judge ... It’s a new song, it’s dedicated to the FCC and if they broadcast it, it will cost a quarter of a million dollars.”

Idle’s profanity-laced riposte comes around the first anniversary of a momentous 3-2 decision to loosen rules governing media ownership. The June 2, 2003 FCC vote was not surprising in light of the Commission’s tendency to rubber stamp the wishes of the industry it is nominally regulating.

What made it so remarkable was the massive grassroots protest that accompanied it. Yet, one year after nearly three million Americans wrote letters to rule makers in Washington protesting media consolidation, media seems more obsessed with self-censorship than self-regulation.

“Who woulda thunk?” Washington Post media writer Howard Kurtz wrote last summer after the explosion of grassroots concern, bewildered that so many Americans revolted on an obscure regulatory media matter that usually rates little attention, much less protest.

Not surprisingly, an issue that in 2003 galvanized more public concern than any other – except the War on Iraq – in 2004 is being downplayed by media that tend to investigate every industry but their own.

Unhappily, Eric Idle was not singing about that, nor has the media used the anniversary of the decision to produce TV specials or follow-up analyses on an issue that affects their bottom line and, critics contend, infects our democracy.

As far as Big Media is concerned, the less said about media ownership the better.

This amusing, in-your-face and off-color Python satire is referring instead, of course, to the FCC’s recent “get tough” policy to cleanse the airwaves of obscenity. It was imposed in the aftermath of Janet Jackson’s “costume reveal.” Conservative groups seized that Super Bowl moment to flood Congress with more than 200,000 emails demanding that something be done.

It was pictured at the time as an avalanche of outrage from an angry public. Never mind

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that more than ten times as many people wrote to complain about the earlier media concentration giveaway. Like the 2000 presidential election, the majority went one way but the minority ruled. A titillating sideshow drove what should have been the main show off the air.

Soon after the prudes ranted, broadcast executives like Viacom's Mel Karmazin were hauled before Congressional Committees and shock jocks like "Bubba the Love Sponge" were being axed while others such as Howard Stern reprimanded.

A wave of Puritanism swept over radio and TV airwaves with networks running for cover as self-censorship became the order of the day. Whenever networks agree to allow the government to impose high fines on their practices, you know that an internal policing structure is put in place to assure that they will not have to transfer profits from their pockets to the US Treasury.

Congressmen, who a week earlier had been railing against government over-regulation, reversed themselves overnight to pacify the angry hordes and now demanded tough government oversight. This new controversy became a sensation in the media, which endlessly reran the exposed boob accompanied by noisy talk show debate. How, God, had the Republic allowed such perversion on the airways?

Ironically and unexpectedly, months later TV viewers would be subjected to a torrent of obscene photographs of Iraqi prisoners being tortured by US soldiers that turned network news into an extension of the S&M channel. Prudes on both sides of the aisle were rendered speechless. Big media has recoiled from the indecency and Iraq violence "furor" by making a show of censoring certain questionable programs while letting others flaunt their sexy and violent fare, especially during the recent May sweeps.

In the year since the FCC's June 2, 2003 decision, the media ownership issue is now languishing in the federal courts in a little-covered case brought against the FCC by low-power radio activists of the Prometheus Radio Project. The U.S. Court of Appeals in Philadelphia is weighing arguments from the media companies that largely supported the sweeping ownership rules changes passed in June 2003, and consumer advocacy groups that successfully sued to stop the rules from being enacted. Media reformers are watching and waiting for a ruling – expected sometime this summer – with the hope that the right (or wrong) decision will recharge their campaign against big media owners. Stay tuned.

In the interim, Congress negotiated a compromise that will allow broadcasters to own up 39 percent of media outlets in a local market, not the 45% they wanted, nor the 35% cap that was previously in place.

What seemed in June to be a victory for media reformers was quietly compromised away at the end of 2003, proving the power that corporate lobbyists exercise in the shadows of

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the Hill.

In June, demands for media reform were championed by hundreds of activist groups although later, more conservative organizations led by the National Rifle Association and the Parents Television Council – that had turned the anti-FCC campaign into a powerful coalition with bi-partisan clout – faded away.

A conference last fall in Madison, Wisconsin, drew an impressive crowd of more than 2,000 organizers, educators and activists but most leaned well to the left. The energy of the event was not followed up the way it might have been.

The 2004 political campaign has now sucked up most of that energy and with the exception of Howard Dean and Dennis Kucinich, none of the Democratic candidates has highlighted media issues. Al Gore is speaking out now on the issues in a way he didn't four years ago, and Ralph Nader, who has made media reform a centerpiece of his campaign, is getting little attention from a media pre-programmed to cover elections as a two-party process.

President Bush, of course is standing by his man at the FCC, chairman Michael Powell, son of his Secretary of State Collin Powell.

At the same time, the corporate cartels i.e., the "Media Bigs," to deploy a Varietyism, are getting bigger, with many of their acquisitions and power grabbing safely outside the range of FCC scrutiny. Rupert Murdoch purchased the giant Echo Star satellite while General Electric, owner of NBC, added Universal Studios and its TV arm to its power portfolio. A challenge to CEO Michael Eisner's power base at Disney by Comcast was not successful but the "Mouse House", as that conglomerate is known, was forced onto the defensive.

As the election campaign rolls on, the role of the media in our democracy is increasingly being underplayed by the media, even as major media companies profit from the record amounts of campaign funds (\$1.47 billion according to Monday Analyst Harris Gerard) raised to be funneled into media coffers as candidates buy political ads this year.

As for public concern – rather than "go away" in the aftermath of June 2, 2003 – the fight for media reform is intensifying. Poll after poll indicates a majority of Americans remains dissatisfied with the way mainstream media cover our elections. Ongoing analysis of this coverage by MediaChannel.org and Media for Democracy 2004, shows mainstream news broadcasters devoting less than 5 percent of their news shows this election year to the issues that Americans say matter to them most.

Few seem happy with the American media, but what can we do about it? More attention must be paid to the small aggregation of groups working behind the scenes and under the big media radar to keep media reform on the political map. This coalition includes groups such as Free Press, Common Cause, MediaChannel.org, the Center for Digital Democracy,

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the Media Access Project, the Alliance for Better Campaigns, the New America Foundation and the Center for Creative Voices in Media. These groups joined in April to combine policy work in Washington with grassroots activism and outreach across the country to give in 2004 shape to a movement that was sparked by citizens one year ago, today.

Their single-minded devotion to reforming consolidated media will do much to restore to Americans media that are diverse, independent, accountable and democratic.

The FCC decision a year ago demonstrated that government will only move when citizens move on it. And that goes for the media too.

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