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AFTER THE FCC VOTE, NOW WHAT?

It is the day after, and the media world and the emerging movements that oppose its growing power have a choice: Acceptance or resistance? The 3-2 party line FCC decision yesterday – called by the New York Times, “the most far reaching deregulatory steps taken during the Bush Administration” – may foreshadow more to come, including a threat to the future of the Internet.

What we do know is that investors were buying shares of the biggest media companies all day, and that there will be law suits on all sides and hearings by the Senate Commerce Committee tomorrow where Chairman Michael Powell, son of Colin, will face many Senators who are making oppositional noises.

“I want to emphasize that there is not a partisan position here,” says the disgraced and now rehabilitated Mississippi Senator Trent Lott who posed with two Democrats yesterday to say that “most of the Republicans in the Congress do not agree with what critics call a further giveaway of the public airwaves.” Speaking for the broadcasters, Congressman Billy Tauzin of Louisiana praised his fellow Republicans on the Commission for “taking the first step toward removing the regulatory muzzle from American Broadcasting.” Note the phrase, “first step.”

Yes Virginia, there is more to come. And in more ways than one. The good news, if there is any, comes from FCC Commissioner Michael Copps (with whom I shared a radio show platform yes-

terday – one of seven – an indication of growing public interest) is that this is just the “end of the beginning” and that a new citizens’ movement on media issues has been born.

THE NET IN DANGER

THE bad news is that the FCC has been able to proceed with a minimum of debate, despite 520,000 comments filed on their proceeding, mostly negative. (There were many more informal comments organized by groups like Moveon.org) Even more dangerous is the attack on the Internet that may be waiting in the wings according to the usually well informed Dan Gillmoor of the San Jose Mercury News. Brace yourself:

“It’s not alarmist, given the plain-as-day trajectory of policies – including the FCC’s own recent actions – to suggest that the Net’s promise is in jeopardy. A few giant media and telecommunications companies could well grasp full control of the Net.

“Earlier this year, the FCC gave U.S. regional phone companies the right to control access to their high-speed data pipes. This basically mirrored earlier policies allowing the cable companies, which also created networks by getting government-granted monopolies, to refuse to share access to their lines. In other words, U.S. high-speed data access will soon be under the thumb of two of the most anti-competitive industries around.

“I doubt they’d dare to stamp out speech they

don't like. But they could turn their systems into what industry people call "walled gardens," where the content they provide gets preferential treatment and where they discriminate against material they don't control. This is not idle speculation. Cisco Systems, the company that sells the gear used to direct Internet traffic around the Internet, is happily offering telecommunications companies the tools to create these walled gardens."

MURDOCH MERGER PENDING

ALSO on the horizon is FCC approval of Rupert Murdoch's latest power grab. Jeff Chester of the Center for Democratic Media warns about this eventuality: "The FCC is currently reviewing News Corp.'s proposed purchase of a controlling interest in Direct TV." The comment period on this merger lasts until June 16th.

MEDIA OBEDIENT

WHERE will the opposition come from? Writing in the New York Times Today, Paul Krugman sees the administration's policies, in every area, as built on deception in which the news media accepts and the Democrats lay down: "It's long past time for this administration to be held accountable. 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 the lies."

WHO IS AGAINST?

WRITING in the Nation, John Nichols who has been crusading on the issue while reporting it: "In addition to provoking passionate opposition from civil rights, consumer, labor, religious and community groups across the country, this spring's debate over the six sweeping changes in media ownership regulations drew more scrutiny of the FCC than had ever before been seen. And that attention has revealed an agency where corporations that are supposed to be regulated enjoy extraordinary access to the regulators – and the favorable treatment that extends from that access."

FCC dissenter Jonathan S. Adelstein worries what will happen as a result of the decision, if it is not reversed: "As big media companies get bigger, they're likely to broadcast even more homogenized programming that increasingly appeals to the lowest common denominator."

Powell minimizes all of these fears saying yesterday: "There's been some inflated fear-mongering. If half the stuff that was said were true, I'd be freaked out, too. The scenarios of the end of the world are exaggerated." And this from an administration that has made "inflated fear-mongering" one of its signatures.

REACTIONS TO THE DECISION

JOHN KERRY: "The FCC should do more than rubber-stamp the business plans of narrow economic interests,"

Bernie Sanders, independent of Vermont: "We have seen that, at the FCC, the regulators do not regulate the industry. It's the opposite: The industry regulates the regulators. And that has to change."

Tom Shales, TV critic, Washington Post: “Revising and relaxing the rules that prohibit a single entity from controlling too large a percentage of American media will allow corporations that are already too big to become much, much bigger. Michael Powell and the FCC are riding to the rescue of huge media conglomerates that need rescuing about as much as Spider-Man, Batman and the Terminator do. Unfortunately, you and I and freedom of speech are the ones getting trampled in the stampede.”

Chuck Lewis, Center for Public Integrity: “The idea that the FCC can render an objective, independent judgment about media ownership is laughable.”

Ted Turner: “Media companies have gotten so large and concentrated that an independent voice has an almost impossible time getting started in any kind of meaningful way, and that’s a great tragedy for our country.”

Patti Miller, Director of Children & the Media Program, Children Now: “Children Now is greatly disappointed in today’s FCC ruling. While the Commission’s decision offers the child audience some protection from the serious harm the rule change will have on children’s programming, it is but a small rowboat for children to navigate in the tidal wave of media consolidation that is about to occur.”

Secretary Donald L. Evans, of the Bush Commerce Department: “I commend the FCC for its action on media ownership today. The FCC has answered the call of Congress and the courts to modernize its rules.”

WILL A NEW MEDIA REFORM MOVEMENT FORM?

AND so the gauntlet has been thrown down to

activists on all sides and everyone concerned with preserving democracy. Will media now become an issue or remain a complaint. Will you get involved to demand a higher level of restraint over media monopolies and more accountability and responsibility by media companies? The airwaves are going, going, going. Will we all wake up before they are totally gone?

BUSH ON THE ROAD (MAP)

PRESIDENT BUSH is in Egypt on his “peace mission.” He met with friendly Arab heads of State who greeted him, reports the Times, with “warmth and wariness.” The big question: will Bush pressure Ariel Sharon on the dismantling of settlements. Israel released 100 Palestinian prisoners, although many were near the end of their terms. It was still be seen as a goodwill gesture of the kind called for in the road map.”

President Bush left the G-8 meeting in Evian, France, before the issues of sustainable development, African famine, AIDS and other concerns raised by Jacques Chirac were even discussed. A Washington Post reporter was interviewed on the BBC this morning and characterized his stay at the conference as “a drive-by.” All he wanted to talk about was Iraq, terrorism, Iran, etc. No particular interest in the sufferings of the rest of the world. The same was true of his British counterpart Mr. Blair.

G-8 STALEMATE MEANS MORE FAMINE

EXPLAINS George Monbiot in The Guardian today that the outcome of the meeting is likely to be more FAMINE in Africa because of British and American unwillingness to change food trade

policies that favor rich countries. (Have you seen in this in the US media?)

“A few weeks ago, President Chirac did something unprecedented. The head of the state which had formerly prevented any real change to Europe’s farm subsidy regime suddenly gave ground. He wanted to show that the G8 summit he is hosting in Evian, which concludes today, would offer something other than just the usual spectacle of the rich and powerful deciding how they would make themselves still richer and more powerful. He approached the US government to suggest that Europe would stop subsidizing its exports of food to Africa if America did the same.

“His offer was significant, not only because it represented a major policy reversal for France, but also because it provided an opportunity to abandon the perpetual agricultural arms race between the EU and the US, in which each side seeks to out-subsidize the other.

So what did Blair do? Writes Monbiot: “our prime minister has single-handedly destroyed the French initiative. The reason will by now be familiar. George Bush, who receives substantial political support from US agro-industrialists, grain exporters, and pesticide manufacturers, was not prepared to make the concessions required to match Chirac’s offer.

“The underlying problem is that the rich nations set the global trade rules. The current world trade agreement was supposed to have prevented the EU and the US from subsidizing their exports to developing nations. But, as Oxfam has shown, the agreement contains so many loopholes that it permits the two big players simply to call their export subsidies by a different name.”

PUBLIC CHEERS

THERE was more evidence today of the impact of the mass media in shaping public opinion in the USA. “Today,” says the USAToday/CNN/Gallop Poll, “most Americans still say things are going reasonably well for the United States in Iraq, despite reports of continued civil disorder there, escalating attacks on American troops, and failure to find weapons of mass destruction. The polls also showed a slight drop in presidential approval.

There are cultural dimensions to all of these “father knows best” attitudes. Robert Parry says there is a flight from reality on his excellent Consortium News website: “Many Americans so enjoyed the TV-driven nationalism of the Iraq War, for instance, that they didn’t want it spoiled by reality. During the conflict, they objected to news outlets showing mangled bodies or wounded children or U.S. POWs. Presenting the ugly face of war was seen as unpatriotic or somehow disloyal to “the troops.” Only positive images were welcome and dissent was deemed almost treasonous.

“Now, even as U.S. forces in Iraq slide closer to the guerrilla-war quagmire that some skeptics predicted, Americans continue to say they trust George W. Bush to handle the situation. Some military analysts close to the Bush administration are beginning to feel differently, however. ‘We’re hanging on by our fingernails,’ one told me recently.

“But Americans still prefer to feel good about the war. They want to believe that the U.S. invasion was just, and that Saddam Hussein really was poised to use weapons of mass destruction. By large majorities, Americans either believe that these weapons have already been found or they

don't care that the Bush administration may have misled the world.”

AMERICA #1

MOVE over Russia. Take this, China. America is now Number #1! The Baltimore Sun reports: “With a record-setting 2 million people locked up in American jails and prisons, the United States has overtaken Russia and has a higher percentage of its citizens behind bars than any other country. Today the United States imprisons at a far greater rate not only than other developed Western nations do, but also than impoverished and authoritarian countries do.”

And on the Prison front, a new report from the Inspector General's Office of the Justice Department indicts the roundup of illegal immigrants after 9/11. Many innocent people were caught in the sweep. The Justice Department has defended its practices.

TODAY FLORI-DUH, TOMORROW THE WORLD

AS many readers know, I directed a film on the Florida election of 2000 called COUNTING ON DEMOCRACY. In it, we interview journalist Greg Palast who exposes a company called ChoicePoint that organized a purge of the voting rolls, ostensibly of ex-felons. Today, The Guardian reports: “A data-gathering company that was embroiled in the Florida 2000 election fiasco is being paid millions of dollars by the Bush administration to collect detailed personal information on the populations of foreign countries, enraging several governments who say the records may have been illegally obtained.

“US government purchasing documents show

that the company, ChoicePoint, received at least \$11m from the department of justice last year to supply data – mainly on Latin Americans – that included names and addresses, occupations, dates of birth, passport numbers and ‘physical description.’ Even tax records and blood groups are reportedly included.

“Nicaraguan police have raided two offices suspected of providing the information. The revelations threaten to shatter public trust in electoral institutions, especially in Mexico, where the government has begun an investigation.”

DANGERS OF COMPUTER VOTING

THIS news about ChoicePoint is of special interest in light of this letter from Tim Eickholt: “Dear Dissector; I'm writing from Tumwater, Washington. I wish to bring up an issue that has concerned me for some time. I have written several people including both of my Senators and my Congressional representative. I think the reason the Rove/Chaney/Bush cartel, who are now calling the shots in DC as if they didn't have to worry about the voters, are doing so for a very good reason. They don't have to face the voters in '04. The vote is a done deal!!

“The next scandal will be how the Republican party has taken over the computerized voting system of this country. Please, please, please use your journalistic investigative skills to study the computerized voting systems in Florida, Georgia, Nebraska, and Pennsylvania, and I'm sure if you check these guys out other truths will become evident. Greg Palast and Martin Luther King III are the only big-timers I know of who are pursuing this story. Please join the search.”

