

June 16, 2003

ACTION URGED TO REVERSE FCC

This is the week for the next media battle. This Wednesday the Senate Commerce Committee votes on whether to rescind the FCC's rule changes or as activists have termed it: the corporate giveaway. William Safire of the New York Times, an unlikely media activist, is leading the charge on the Op-ed page today: He writes:

“The Federal Communications Commission – in business to protect the public's interest in our nation's airwaves - has by a 3-to-2 vote opened the floodgates to a wave of media mergers that will further crush local diversity and concentrate the power to mold public opinion in the hands of ever-fewer giant corporations.

“Now it's up to Congress to overturn the ruling by the round-heeled F.C.C. On Thursday, Senate Commerce will mark up a bill put forward by Ted Stevens, Republican of Alaska, to roll back the penetration to 35 percent. It will be amended by Byron Dorgan, Democrat of North Dakota, to roll back the cross-ownership. “[A] power grab engineered by a seemingly unstoppable lobby has at least a chance of being stymied by an aroused public resentful of media manipulation.”

You can still have a say, Go <http://www.mediareform.net> for how to take cyber-action.

This is all part of a petition campaign. Says Mediareform.net: “With your help, this ‘viral’ petition campaign will create a massive wave of petitions to Commerce committee members in both chambers.

The legislation (S.1046) would roll back the broadcast ownership cap limit, and a crucial amendment is planned that would reverse the rule allowing cross-ownership of newspapers and TV stations.

Here's what to do:

- 1) Go to the petition campaign: <http://www.mediareform.net/stopthefcc>
- 2) Personalize the message to your Congressional delegation
- 3) Enter email addresses of friends and colleagues in your state
- 4) Send your message. It will be printed out and walked to your members of Congress, and this message will be forwarded to your contacts. Your friends will not receive spam as a result of this petition.

CONGRESSIONAL ACTION NOT ENOUGH

WHATEVER Congress does this week, pressure will still be needed say Bob McChesney and John Nichols of the new organization Free Press: “The Congressional interest – and potential intervention – is great news. But Americans should not be lulled into complacency by a sense that Congress will simply do the right thing when it comes to defending competition, diversity and local control of media. Only by keeping up the pressure on Congress will citizens force their representatives to block these rule changes and to begin the process of restoring the public-interest rules and

regulations that will protect the public interest that the FCC chose to ignore.”

THE PRICE OF INACTION

THE New Yorker’s brilliant financial columnist James Surowiecki puts some of these issues in a broader perspective, writing: “. . . the problem isn’t just that a small number of companies run the media business right now; it’s that, under the current system, the same companies will likely be running the media business twenty years from now. Media concentration would be fine if there were genuine competition, but, practically speaking, there isn’t very much (at least, on the broadcast and programming side), thanks to the regulatory reforms of the early nineties (which, among other things, allowed TV networks to own their own shows, instead of having to buy them from outside studios) and the merger boom of the past few years.

The media giants’ incestuous relationships bring to mind the economy of South Korea, which was dominated by giant conglomerates until the late nineteen-nineties, when it had a meltdown. The conglomerates, or chaebol, were notoriously inefficient, dedicated to empire building rather than to profitability. Their sheer size and their connections to the government (and to each other) insulated them from competition and discouraged upstarts. That’s why, in the wake of Korea’s economic crisis, the advice from Western policymakers was clear: reform the chaebol and let a hundred flowers bloom. Perhaps we should tend our own garden, too.

STOPPING MURDOCH’S MERGER

THE FCC is just one issue. Overshadowed but

just as critical is a new merger attempt that will give Rupert Murdoch new satellite power. Jeff Chester of the Center for Digital Democracy is fighting a lonely crusade on that issue:

“The Center for Digital Democracy filed a petition with the Federal Communications Commission today expressing opposition to the proposed transfer of General Motors/Hughes Electronics’ DirecTV to Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation. The media watchdog organization cited seven distinct areas of concern raised by the proposed merger, including the unparalleled power that News Corp. would wield in broadcast and cable programming and distribution; the company’s anti-competitive advantage in the areas of set-top box software, electronic program guides, and interactive advertising; the impact of the interrelationship of News Corp. and Liberty Media on the interactive TV marketplace; allegations of News Corp. misconduct in other venues, including cases under review by international regulatory bodies; and questions about the alleged independence of the board of directors of the newly merged entity.

“The DirecTV acquisition by News Corp. should be ‘Exhibit A’ in the case against the FCC’s recent decision to relax media ownership limits,” declared Jeff Chester, CDD’s executive director.”

M-O-N-E-Y

AND now we turn to the heart of this matter. Interests – not issues. Or, in a word: money. And the work of oilman and W business partner Mercer Reynolds the Third. He is the finance chairman for George The Second. And is he priming the pump. Have mercy, Sunday’s New York Times has a lead story built around the D WORD-no, not dissector but dominance, Not on the military

front—we have that we think—but on the financial side. The richest people in the America are being asked to pay for their prosperity. The story:

“Fund-Raising Push by Bush Will Put Rivals Far Behind”

“President Bush is embarking on a fund-raising sprint that Republicans say will collect at least \$20 million in two weeks.”

So we jump ahead to page 20 and read all about the 14 fund-raising events planned in the next two weeks with \$26 million expected. Missing is the invitation lists, and a roster of prospective donors. The data is thin but the goal is clear: “Fund raisers said they had to do little prodding to persuade donors to put up money.”

How blatant and at the same time so ho-hum. This was the quote of the day from Steve Elmen-dorf, who its trying to raise money for Congress leader Dick Gephard.. He compares the Bush fundraising effort to his competitors: “The fundamental difference is that Bush himself spends no time on it. He gets on a plane, shows up for 15 minutes and leaves. And each of these candidates spend volumes of time on the phone asking for money.”

THE FORDS AND THE FORDS

ON another corporate front, this was the weekend that the Family Ford marked the 100th anniversary of their auto company. All the Fords were on hand toasting their history (which included the anti-Semitic ravings of founder Henry the First) and bemoaning the present, which includes a current loss of only \$6.4 BILLION. They are confident they will turn the company around.

While the Fords toast their fortunes, I spent Sat-

urday night watching a film about some of their most devoted customers: drivers who carry passengers in Palestinian territories occupied by Israeli soldiers who have pock marked it with road blocks that have turned the “road map” to peace into a humiliating daily reality. The film by Hany Abu-Assad is called FORD TRANSIT and is a must see. I caught it at the annual Human Rights International Film Festival in New York’s Lincoln Center. What the film captures with humor and great insight is the experience of ordinary Palestinians who live like they are in a cage, subject to restrictions on the right to movement and their rights period. The Fords by the way were once Israeli police vehicles, which were later sold to Palestinian entrepreneurs.

After the film, Abu Assad, who won the Nestor Alem-dros award for courage in filmmaking answered questions. Many were political, but in the course of his response he noted that he can’t watch the news anymore. And you can see why: The realities he depicts are so much more textured and illuminating than most TV news. He truly gets at truths that go deeper than most journalists. (The festival is still on. For details, see Hrw.org/iff.)

US TROOPS TO JOIN HAMAS HUNT?

AS for news from the Middle East, the situation is deteriorating even as negotiators try to get talks going. Senator Richard Lugar called for US troops to be sent to help the Israelis track down Hamas terrorists as if they are the only ones to blame for the latest stage of the war that is now underway. The Israeli writer Uri Avnery explains that Israel’s campaign against Hamas (which Ariel Sharon, by the way, had a role in creating to promote internal

rivalry among Palestinians) was premeditated:

“The killing of the Hamas leaders (together with their wives, children and casual bystanders) is intended to attain the following results: (a) acts of revenge by Hamas, i.e. suicide bombings, (b) the failure of the Palestinian Authority’s efforts to secure the agreement of Hamas to a cease-fire, (c) the destruction of Abu Mazen’s political standing right from the start, (d) the demolition of the Road Map, (e) compensation for the settlers after the removal of some sham “outposts.”

All five objectives have been achieved PRO-VOKING RETALIATION IS AN OLD TRICK

An earlier piece in the June 15th Ha’aretz, published in Israel by Uzi Benziman tells a story about how Ariel Sharon in the past used provocative and violent tactics to trigger a reaction that he could in turn respond to:

“Sharon invented this method in the early `50s: When he was commander of a battalion of reservists in the Jerusalem Brigade, he instructed a number of his officers to shoot women at the village of Katana when they were drawing water.

The reason for this was that, on the way to the well, the women crossed the border. Already thinking the killings would result in an artillery response by the Arab Legion, he set in place teams with mortars. And so it was: A quiet area exploded and the UN observers had to intervene.

NOTE TO READERS

TO preview Danny Schechter’s just published e-book on the media coverage of the war in Iraq, visit ColdType.net. The book, “EMBEDDED: WEAPONS OF MASS DECEPTION,” discusses “how the media failed to cover the war on Iraq.” Mediachannel is selling electronic editions of it for \$15.99. You can pay by Paypal but must also write dissector@mediachannel.org so we can send you the PDF file. For donations of \$100, we will send you the e-book, as well as the paperback edition of “MEDIA WARS: News at a Time of Terror” (Rowman & Littlefield) and Polarity 1’s companion CD soundtrack.

Please tell your lists and your friends. We need help in getting the word out.

