

May 21, 2003

THE BOOING OF CHRIS HEDGES

Will the New York Times fire the acclaimed anti-war journalist Chris Hedges? He will find out later today when he meets news executives at the scandal-tinged newspaper of record. “It is very serious,” Hedges told me early this morning as he waited to be interviewed by Amy Goodman on the Democracy Now radio show. “I have very few friends at the paper,” confided the award-winning author of “War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning” and the new book, “What Every Person Should Know About War.” Hedges, just back from an incident at Rockford College where microphones were cut during his graduation speech, may face problems with his “freedom of the press” just as he had with his freedom of speech. He traces his fallout with the Times to an article he wrote for Harper’s on his experience of covering Gaza. He refused to cover the War on Iraq.

Chris Hedges was booed during a graduation ceremony at Rockford College in Illinois. Why? He opposed the war. Carrie Waters reports in the Rockford Register Star: “Hedges began his abbreviated 18-minute speech comparing United States’ policy in Iraq to piranhas and a tyranny over the weak. His microphone was unplugged within three minutes.

“Voices of protest and the sound of foghorns grew. Some graduates and audience members turned their backs to the speaker in silent protest. Others rushed up the aisle to vocally protest the

remarks, and one student tossed his cap and gown to the stage before leaving.” Democracy Now was playing Hedges’ speech as I left their studios in lower Manhattan after talking about Mediachannel.org’s coverage of the war.

WEAR YELLOW

DESPITE a lack of specific information, the homeland security people have jacked up the alert level to high. Get your orange gear out. According to CNN: “The United States raised the nation’s terror threat level Tuesday, saying the U.S. intelligence community believes al Qaeda has entered an ‘operational period worldwide’ and might attack within the United States.”

This is not something to joke about but it is hard to take US government policies seriously because they keep shifting from one gear to the next based on “chatter.” In England, they used to talk about the chattering classes as the intellectual elite. Now they are the terrorist commandos.

METALLICA TO THE RESCUE

THE United States is fighting back – get this – with heavy metal music. The Globalvision News Network (gvnews.net) is carrying this report from the Prada website in Russia: “American jailers in Iraq invented a new variant of psychological attack. Captive fellows of Saddam Hussein are forced to listen to heavy metal and cartoon film music. One serviceman says the measure is effective.

“Sergeant Marc Hudson explains, with a view to

break down the resistance of the national population and to create continuous tension, US military use loud aggressive music which is humiliating to the local cultural traditions.

“The sergeant makes Iraqis listen to the song, “Bodies” (from the film XXX where Vin Diesel plays a charismatic and daring type), and also “Enter Sandman” by Metallica. He likes this music, but the situation is quite different with Iraqis.

“They have never listened to heavy metal. That is why they cannot stand it.” If one is listening to this music day and night, one’s brain and body will weaken, the soberness of mind and the will are sure to be crushed,” Hudsell said.”

This gives new meaning to the chant “Metallica Rules.” This is not a new tactic. US soldiers blasted heavy metal at Panama’s Noriega when he was surrounded in a Catholic institution after the invasion of that country. The red brigades in Italy did something similar when it captured former Italian Prime Minister Aldo Moro.

Q: WHAT HAPPENED TO JESSICA?

A: NOT WHAT YOU THINK!

THE BBC took a second look at the dramatic rescue of Private Jessica Lynch, centerpiece of Iraq coverage. Guess what? It didn’t happen the way we were told. Ellis Henicen dissects this story of deception in his Newsday column:

“No wonder Jessica Lynch has amnesia. The story of her dramatic capture and rescue has just gotten a whole lot weirder, even for a 19-year-old Army private who says she can’t remember a thing.

“And she may not be the only one with memory problems about the war in Iraq. The Pentagon is

also having trouble recalling what happened over there.

“Was Jessica shot?

“Was she stabbed?

“Was she slapped around by brutal Iraqi interrogators?

“Was she freed in a daring rescue by Army Rangers and Navy Seals, who braved enemy fire as they stormed a heavily guarded hospital in Nasiriyah and then choppered young Jessica away?

“That’s the way Pentagon officials told the story back in early April, an account that turned a sweet-faced clerk from Palestine, W. Va., into America’s plucky poster girl for the war with Iraq. The story made front-page news across America and the cover of Newsweek. No war-obsessed TV producer could resist night-vision video of the American commando raid, conveniently supplied by Central Command.”

But now, some uncomfortable questions are being asked about what really happened to Pvt. Jessica Lynch.

“Her rescue will go down as one of the most stunning pieces of news management yet conceived,” said John Kampfner, a British journalist who has taken a hard second look at the case for the BBC and the Guardian newspaper. His documentary, “Saving Private Jessica: Fact or Fiction?” aired in Britain on Sunday night.

When will US television show it?

HATE EDUCATION PROMOTES TERROR

THERE seems to be some self-criticism going on in parts of the Arab World. In Arab News, Dr. Saiful Islam ibn Saud challenges hate content in some Islamic education: “Did last week’s bomb-

ings in Riyadh come as a surprise? Those who know what our children are being taught about Islam, their teachers and the kind of ideas they are constantly fed were not surprised. Those who listen to cassette recordings (which in reality have no basis in Islam) and believe what is said in the recordings were not surprised. Those who listen to what is often said at Friday sermons were not surprised. Those who know how people who follow different schools of thought are ridiculed and treated with contempt were not surprised.

“Any person who digs into the root causes of last week’s explosions and the resulting death and destruction will not be shocked at what actually happened. The implications of those tragic events, which involved the smuggling of weapons into our country, will be far-reaching and spread to all levels.”

DON'T TRUST TERROR "EXPERTS"

A PROMINENT terrorism expert who has been on TV a lot is in the news. There had been a nasty row involving one Steven Emerson, a self-styled terrorism expert who was criticized by journalists and then sued them – and now has dropped the suit. Counterpunch reports:

“Self-styled ‘terrorism expert’ Steven Emerson has filed for dismissal of a multi-million-dollar defamation suit against a Florida newspaper and its senior editor. The “notice of voluntary dismissal” (Case No. 00-03739) filed in the Circuit Court in and for Hillsborough County, Fla., states: “Plaintiff Steven Emerson herewith serves notice of his dismissal of this action, without prejudice, against defendants John Sugg and The Weekly Planet, Inc.”

“This lawsuit did not have any merit, and I

believe it was filed in bad faith to deter us and others from telling the truth about Emerson. I think that ‘pseudo-journalist’ is a perfect description for Steven Emerson,” said Sugg, currently senior editor of Creative Loafing in Atlanta, Ga. Sugg added: “We reported the truth. In four years of litigation, Emerson has been unwilling or unable to come up with any evidence that what we reported was false. Now that we were close to forcing him to back up his claims, he has run away.”

The complaint centered on allegations reported by Sugg that two Associated Press reporters said Emerson gave them a document on terrorism supposedly from FBI files: “One reporter thought he’d seen the material before, and in checking found a paper Emerson had supplied earlier containing his own unsupported allegations. The two documents were almost identical, except that Emerson’s authorship was deleted from the one purported to be from the FBI. ‘It was really his work,’ one reporter says. ‘He sold it to us trying to make it look like a really interesting FBI document.’ ”

FIGHTING MEDIA MONOPLIES

SUGG is still battling against media abuse. This week he has a piece in Creative Loafing on the role of the Cox media empire in Atlanta in not revealing its own interests in new rules expected to pass the FCC on June 2. He begins his story this week with a quote from veteran Journalist Carl Bernstein: “The lowest form of popular culture – lack of information, misinformation, disinformation, and a contempt for the truth or the reality of most people’s lives – has overrun real journalism. Today, ordinary Americans are being stuffed with garbage.

“You were dumbed down and stuffed with

garbage last week by the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, which is acting along with its Cox masters as a fifth column on behalf of one of the Bush administration's many forays against democracy.

"That's significant because, on June 2, the Federal Communications Commission will undoubtedly vote to remove almost all restraints on media monopolies. With the FCC's blessing, Cox's cash registers will cha-ching billions of dollars in windfall profits following the latest pirating of the public's airwaves. But you won't learn that by reading the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, which seems to have different rules for its Coxopoly than it does for other businesses."

WILL THE DECISION BE DELAYED?

FAIR, the media watchdog groups has issued an alert on the plans of the majority on the FCC: "While FCC chair Michael Powell has the votes to pass the plan, the decision to vote on the matter by June 2 could still be challenged to allow for more public education and debate. Several senators have asked for a delay in the process, and a measure to that end was introduced on May 9 in the House of Representatives (Reuters, 5/13/03). The two Democratic FCC commissioners, Michael Copps and Kenneth Adelstein, also oppose the deregulation, and requested on May 13 that the Commission postpone its planned vote. Powell rejected their request.

"The FCC's rulemaking process is, by design, difficult to follow, but the potential impact of what the New York Times called (3/14/03) 'the most important set of rules changes in decades' is alarmingly clear. Broadcasting & Cable reported (5/15/03) that the FCC's current proposals would allow a single company to own as many as three

TV stations in any of the five biggest markets (New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston and Philadelphia), and permit ownership of two TV stations – as well as a major newspaper – 'in nearly all of the largest 100 markets.' In large radio markets, according to B&C, the changes would allow a company to own eight radio and two TV stations."

RUPERT'S "DEATH STAR"

SPEAKING of Murdoch, Jeffrey Chester writes on Alternet about the role of Rupert Murdoch: "Even as Michael Powell and the GOP sweep away long-standing media ownership safeguards, media mogul Rupert Murdoch is mobilizing to further expand his TV empire beyond broadcast and cable. His plans to acquire the key direct broadcast satellite service (DBS) – DirecTV – will allow Murdoch to advance his conservative political agenda, creating new channels and services that disseminate the right-wing ideology now espoused by Fox News.

"News Corp. wants to buy Hughes Electronics – the parent company of DirecTV – from General Motors. If the deal is allowed to go through, Murdoch will have a triple play when it comes to influencing U.S. television with his control of broadcast, cable and satellite channels. His News Corp now owns 35 broadcast TV stations and significant cable channels like Fox News, Fox Sports and even National Geographic TV. Add to that DirecTV's 11 million subscribers and Murdoch will be able to greatly shape broadcast and new digital television services.

"The need to oppose the DirecTV acquisition is urgent. Contrary to his promises, Murdoch will use DirecTV as a 'death star' to force his programming on cable companies by threatening a price

war unless they give Fox favorable access. Since News Corp will control cable TV's principal multi-channel competitor, it will easily create new channels – unlike anyone else in the TV business.”

GOOD RIDDANCE ARI

ON another media front, no tears are being shed at the White House at the departure of Ari Fleischer. The Hartford Courant sampled reaction: “At his daily briefings, he made an art-form of the non-answer answer and was not above freezing out a reporter for criticizing his boss.

“So his announcement at Monday afternoon’s briefing that he’ll leave his post in July to work in the private sector sent the Washington press corps buzzing about Fleischer’s legacy. ‘He is rendering the White House press briefings a useless exercise,’ said Howard Fineman, Newsweek’s political correspondent. ‘It isn’t designed anymore to do anything other than reinforce with an almost religious zeal the message of the day. If you believe in openness in government, it’s a bad thing.’

“Fineman continued, ‘In another lifetime, he could have been the press secretary for the Kremlin. To be able to be that boring and bland and that non-newsworthy in his role as White House press secretary is a perverse accomplishment.’ ”

ISRAEL LOCKS OUT INDY MEDIA

FIRST Israel closed the door on peace groups from other countries. Now independent journalists are being singled out. A press freedom group reports: “On Wednesday May 14th, British-Palestinian filmmaker Omar Al-Qattan and his two-member crew from Belgium, Olivier Pulinckx and Cosmas Antoniadis, were denied entry to Israel on grounds of ‘security.’

“No further explanation was granted. The three were due to make a film, to be broadcast on the European Television Channel Arté, on a journey to Palestine by the celebrated British writer John Berger (Booker Prize 1972) and Swiss photographer Jean Mohr, who are currently giving a series of workshops in the Palestinian Territories on photography, art and narrative, co-hosted by the British Council.

“Al-Qattan, 39, who also directs the Culture and Science Program of the A.M. Qattan Foundation, a British charity with offices in London, Ramallah and Gaza, was due to moderate the workshops. The Israeli Embassy Press Office had been informed of their trip and at no time indicated

