

May 23, 2003

TV OR NOT TV? THAT IS THE QUESTION

Television rarely reports on itself critically, but sometimes news dribbles out that reveals the real face (and preoccupations) of our media world. CNN this morning was cheerfully telling us about the meeting this week by the industry's real critics, the advertisers and the companies they shill for. The event, known as the UP FRONT, is about how much money is about to be committed to bringing us (i.e. financing) the Fall TV Season. Anchor Carol Costello was all-smiles to hear that the money pumps are in good order and that over FIVE BILLION is about to be transferred from corporate coffers to media ones.

Yummy.

General Electric (aka NBC), which is leading in the ratings wars can count on over 3 billion. And that does not include the windfall from 2004 political advertising and Olympic spots. What went unsaid is that consumers and citizens end up paying for all of this through higher product costs and gifts to political campaigns. Thus, no matter who wins on the playing field or on the political arena, the networks benefit.

As CNN's anchor and business reporter chirped about all this beneficence (while reminding us that Cable's payday is yet to come), a story emerged of how ABC flew the cast of their show, *The Practice*, in from LA to wow the Madison Ave. crowd. They were feted and paraded about. But then – chuckle, chuckle – they flew home to find out that many cast members are now out of

work. This is so typical. So cold.

Usually, the scenario is different. As I discovered along with many an Emmy award winner, recognition for program excellence means nothing to the accountants who run the show. It is often the case that programs are cancelled soon after the glow of the awards ceremony has rubbed off. The TV comedian Jimmy Kimmel should not have been surprised to find his network publicizing the promotion of a new Financial Vice President before plugging his show in a recent publicity release. They understand their priorities even if many viewers and even TV performers buy the illusion.

Gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson understood this when he wrote: “The TV business is a cruel and shallow money trench, a long plastic hallway where thieves and pimps run free and good men die like dogs.”

Bow Wow.

Now perhaps we can see that the crap pumped out on the front of the screen is simply a reflection of that “cruel and shallow money trench on the back.” No wonder journalists these days are reduced to denouncing each other. Most don't dare to take on the men behind the curtain.

“MEDIA BETRAYAL SEASON”

THE sometime-publisher and now columnist/TV host Tina Brown, relishes this aspect of the media war, speaking of a “media betrayal season: in the Times of London. “My head is spinning with cries

of J'accuse!" She then blames the internet, "Perhaps the amping up of the vogue for treachery is the internet's fault. It makes everyone the star of their own media soap opera." Her target: bloggers. Hey wait a minute, Tina.

What about all the big media companies now besides themselves with self assessments and reactions to the Jayson Blair affair over at the New York Times, which has taken itself down a notch or two on the credibility scale.

MediaNews.org reports that "Rocky Mountain News editor John Temple has told his staff that New York Times stories with anonymous sources "must be approved in advance" by an editor. Michael Roberts says that's "an astonishing development, because it suggests that in a few short weeks, the Times has gone from being among the most trusted news purveyors on the planet to a publication viewed with suspicion by its peers."

Over at the Wall Street journal, editor Peter Kann tells Dow Jones employees: "Frankly, I don't think any of us can say with 100% certainty that an isolated incident of plagiarism or fabrication cannot happen at Dow Jones." Up in Boston, the Globe is in an uproar of sorts: The Boston Globe's investigation of 85 stories that Jayson Blair wrote for the paper as an intern and freelancer found "a handful of problems with quotes and imagery lifted from other newspapers . . . and a pattern of mangling names and places." Also, the Globe says several people denied speaking to Blair or said that they were misquoted."

ABBIE'S BET

THIS all reminds me of a bet Abbie Hoffman used make at the beginning of his lectures. He would offer to pay \$100 to any reporter present who could file a story on his speech that had less

than three mistakes. "that's a bet I never had to pay off on," Abbie, a chronic gambler without Bill Bennett's bankroll, once told me.

Clearly the problems of the media go deeper than the abuses of one young and very troubled reporter. They are institutional and have to do with media as a corporate animal, totally integrated into a corporate system. No wonder it covers it so badly. It is part of it. And no wonder politicians spend so much time and money making use of its power. The Bush administration is a master of all of this.

ON THE WHITE HOUSE PRESS

THE departure of Ari Fleischer will not change the relationship of the press to power. Writing in Counterpunch, David Lindorf disagrees with those who thought Ari should have stepped down.

"No, the real question is why no one in the White House Press Corps has had the sense of principle and the courage to say that they would no longer participate in the charade that is being passed off as journalism. They all know that they've been lied to repeatedly, but they are the willing conduits of those lies to the American public. Night after night, one can watch them carrying Fleischer's water, not cracking a smile as they gravely report the latest politically timed raising of the terror alert level, not bursting out laughing as they report on the president's claim that Al Queda is no longer a problem.

"These people – who call themselves journalists – actually allowed themselves to be scripted into a fake White House press conference, where the president pretended to be selecting reporters to ask questions when they had actually submitted them in advance and he had picked the ones he

would answer, and where those few reporters who objected, like Helen Douglas, were unceremoniously dumped in the rear of the pool among the potted palms (with no protest from her colleagues).

CONTROL THE VISUALS FIRST

THE problem goes much deeper: As Randolph T. Holhut explains in a just published piece: “Control the visuals, and you control the story. That’s why President Bush is probably the most stage-managed president in history. His handlers have masterfully exploited the sad fact that most Americans get their news from television. Television demands dramatic pictures and simple narratives, and that’s exactly what American viewers get from the Bush White House.

“One can argue that Gulf War II was simply one big photo-op, or more accurately, an advertisement to the rest of the world of what will happen when the U.S. decides it wants ‘regime change.’ Without the presence of the television cameras, the expensive fireworks show over Baghdad in the opening days of the war probably wouldn’t have happened. Once the visuals changed from triumphant conquering soldiers to wanton lawlessness, Iraq pretty much dropped off the television news radar. Explaining the messiness of being an occupying force was left to the newspapers; a news medium that fewer and fewer people rely on.”

MEANWHILE, BACK IN IRAQ

AND, yes more lawlessness in the pillaging of archeological sites was reported in Iraq where the big story of the day is will Saddam’s son, Uday, give himself up. There are reports that he is negotiating. Not being reported is what happens to all

of these people. Given the contempt for international law and institutions in Washington, it is unlikely that there will be a UN tribunal. Will American justice, unilaterally imposed, be accepted? It sounds like Alice in Wonderland: “first the sentence, then the trial” or as the late Lenny Bruce once quipped, “in the halls of justice, the only justice is in the halls.”

With questions being raised about the honesty of the selections for “American Idol,” won’t others be raised about what happens to now “liberated” Iraq.

The only good news was on Fox Report, which showed that some of the manuscripts and books looted from the burned national library have been found, protected in a small mosque. A Fox reporter, dressed in Islamic garb, reported incoherently about this on Fox and Friends. She revealed that, alas, “they didn’t have time to show ‘the package’ ” – a TV term for a pre-produced report – which would have been preferable to her string of convoluted sentences.

TOWERIN’ TOMMY SASHAYS OUT AND CASHES IN

AND now that the war is over, US commander Tommy Franks, who hails from President Bush’s hometown of Midland Texas, is retiring. And just in time to snag an estimated \$5 million dollar book deal and go on the lecture circuit at “50 grand a pop,” according to the Post. There is also an effort underway to make him more of a folk hero like “Stormin’ Norman” Schwartzkopf, who ran Gulf War 1.

Some marketing men want to dub him “Towerin’ Tommy.” Maybe he will go into wrestling next, battling with one of those out-of-work Saddam doubles.

BOWING DOWN AT THE UN

OVER at the UN, capitulation was being called “collaboration” as the French and their coalition of the unwilling tried to kiss and make up with Colin Powell. Ian Williams reported on the Globalvision News Network: “The stalwart French have taken the crumbs offered by Uncle Sam, liberally garnished them with their own words and eaten them in public. On Thursday morning they rolled over to support U.N. Security Council Resolution 1483, that to a large extent legalizes the invasion and occupation of Iraq, previously denounced by most of the council as illegal. It is almost as if a jury returned a verdict of justified homicide for a lynch mob.

“Ironically, one of the many absolutely cosmetic concessions the French wrung from the Americans was the change of the word ‘collaborating’ to ‘working together,’ to describe the role of the United Nations Special Representative, who had also been upgraded from Special Coordinator. There may be some deep psychology at play here. The French ambassador pointed out that the word ‘collaborate’ has some pretty nasty connotations in French.

“It does in English as well. And so does the deed of collaboration.”

POWELL TO PAREE: SPREAD EM

THE US response was ‘bend further.’ Colin Powell, even called ‘vengeful’ by the new York Post, is seen posing with the French Ambassador before it was revealed that French troops have been dissed and dis-invited from participating in a US military exercise.

In more media-related news, the institute of War

and Peace Reporting carries this report by Emir Suljagic and Stacy Sullivan from the Hague:

“A media expert who testified in Slobodan Milosevic’s trial told the court this week that he had no doubt that the ex-president had controlled the media in the former Yugoslavia. Milosevic used newspapers and broadcasters to spread fear, dehumanize Muslims and Croats, and induce Serbs to fight against their former countrymen, the witness claimed.

“Professor Renaud de la Brosse, a propaganda expert from the University of Reims in France, took the stand as part of the prosecution’s effort to prove a link between what the media said and war crimes perpetrated on the battlefield.

“De la Brosse said he had studied some 20,000 pages of newspaper articles, transcripts of television and radio broadcasts covering nearly a decade, to produce the 100-page report he prepared for the prosecution.”

LEFT OUT

CLOSER to home, guess where this analysis appears. (Hint, it is not Noam Chomsky speaking): “The biggest problem with America’s public discourse today is that the left is barely represented at all on mainstream TV and radio talk shows and in major newspapers and magazines,” argues Thane Peterson, who notes that discourse in the UK is far more well-balanced, with both the left and right represented in broadcast media. If the FCC goes forward as planned with a rewrite of its media ownership rules, things are likely to get much worse, with more homogenized and less substantive programming. Peterson is particularly concerned by the misleading proposition that the US media market is generally liberal when in fact the most notorious TV talk show hosts lean to the

right, which has kept the media ownership issue off of network TV. “Market forces should create alternatives. Yet, I don’t see that happening in our major media[s] political coverage. My theory is that big companies controlling the media just aren’t much interested in creating liberal alternatives.” This article appears in Business Week.

BUCHWALD’S TAKE

VETERAN humorist and syndicated columnist Art Buchwald went after the media yesterday noting: “It wasn’t terrorism or a coup d’etat that turned the United States into a dictatorship. It was the information monopoly. The first inkling that the country was in trouble came when the FCC gave the giant media companies more control over what they could own.”

MEMORIAL DAY MESSAGE

FINALLY, on this eve of Memorial Day weekend let us rededicate ourselves to trying to postpone the day when we have to mourn the final passing of democracy. I will leave you with some thoughts of the conscience of the Senate, Robert Byrd:

“Truth has a way of asserting itself despite all attempts to obscure it. Distortion only serves to derail it for a time. No matter to what lengths we humans may go to obfuscate facts or delude our fellows, truth has a way of squeezing out through the cracks, eventually. But the danger is that at some point it may no longer matter. The danger is that damage is done before the truth is widely realized. The reality is that, sometimes, it is easier to ignore uncomfortable facts and go along with whatever distortion is currently in vogue. But, I contend that, through it all, the people know. The American people unfortunately are used to political shading, spin, and the usual chicanery they hear from public officials. They patiently tolerate it up to a point. But there is a line. It may seem to be drawn in invisible ink for a time, but eventually it will appear in dark colors, tinged with anger.

“And mark my words, the calculated intimidation which we see so often of late by the “powers that be” will only keep the loyal opposition quiet for just so long. Because eventually, like it always does, the truth will emerge. And when it does, this house of cards, built of deceit, will fall.”

