

July 24, 2003

KEEPING SCORE: NEWS BY NUMBERS

Baseball scores are staples on every newscast, even as our national pastime seems to have shifted these days to other numbers. So far today, 3 represents the number of new US soldiers dead in Iraq near the city of Mosul, triggering suspicion that their killings by ambush may have been payback for the death by shoot out of Saddam's two sons. 221,000 is the number of US veterans now on permanent disability in the aftermath of Gulf War I; 7 seems to be number of bullets fired inside New York's City Hall Council chambers as one crazed wannabe candidate pumped lead into an anti-crime fighting representative from Brooklyn before he was blown away by a policemen. 789 is the number of children said by officials to have been abused by priests in Massachusetts since 1949. The only positive numbers I could find were these: 400-21.

MEDIA MOGULS MASSACRED ON CAPITOL HILL

THAT was the vote yesterday in the House of Representatives sending what may be a death blow to FCC plans to permit TV networks to gobble up even more stations and power. The Bush Administration is threatening its first veto of a Congressional action if the anti-FCC vote stands in both the House and the Senate. This is a big blow to an industry that constantly justifies itself in terms of giving the people what they want.

Moguls: wake up. The people, right, left, and center, don't want it.

Here's an issue that no one was even talking about a few months back. The media was ignoring it too, hoping the opposition would melt away. But instead, a mighty bi-partisan movement multiplied. And corporate interests are facing a serious challenge.

SAFIRE SAVAGES MEDIA GIGANTISM

ODDLY, one of those leading the charge against the FCC is a Republican and former Nixon speechwriter William Safire of the New York Times. He writes today with passion and a spirit of populism: "The sleeper issue is media gigantism. People are beginning to grasp and resent the attempt by the Federal Communications Commission to allow the Four Horsemen of Big Media — Viacom (CBS, UPN), Disney (ABC), Murdoch's News Corporation (Fox) and G.E. (NBC) — to gobble up every independent station in sight.

"Couch potatoes throughout the land see plenty wrong in concentrating the power to produce the content we see and hear in the same hands that transmit those broadcasts. This is especially true when the same Four Horsemen own many satellite and cable providers and already influence key sites on the Internet....

"If Bush wishes to carry out the veto threat, he'll pick up a bunch of diehards (now called "dead-enders"), but he will risk suffering an unnecessary humiliation. Sometimes you put the veto gun back in the holster. The way out: a president can

always decide to turn down the recommendation of his senior advisers.”

HITCH BACK FROM THE FRONT

ON the Iraq front, war booster, ex-leftist, new rightist Christopher Hitchens seemed a bit disappointment. His tour of the colonies placed him in Mosul where he reported seeing great cheer for the USA with flags waving and babies smiling. Unfortunately, he left a day before the raid on the hideout of the Brothers Hussein. The big debate in the Pentagon is whether and when to show the gruesome pictures of their demise. Some hope it will “prove” the US is winning. Other fear it will gross out the populace and provoke more resistance. Writing from Baghdad, Robert Fisk reports in the Independent: “They won’t believe they’re dead until they see the pictures.” Rym Brahimi of CNN passes along a rumor in the streets, namely that the US has Saddam but is holding him because as long as Iraqis know he is alive, they will want US troops to stay.

ZINN: SOME HISTIORICAL PERSPECTIVE

MEANWHILE anti-war activists believe all of this—pictures or not—is a long way from being over. Historian Howard Zinn writes on ZNET that this conflict is only in the fifth inning (See, a baseball metaphor from a presumed Red Sox fan.) “A bit of historical perspective reminds us that governments which seem to be in total control, of guns, of money, of the minds of the population, find that all their power is futile against the power of an aroused citizenry. The leaders awake one morning to see a million angry people in the streets of the capital city, and they begin packing

their bags and calling for a helicopter. This is not a fantasy but history. It’s the history of the Philipines, of Indonesia, of Russia, East Germany, Poland, Hungary, Rumania, and other places where change looked hopeless and then it happened.

“There is a long history of imperial powers, gloating over victories, becoming over-extended and overconfident, as their citizens begin to get uneasy because their day-to-day fundamental needs are being sacrificed for military glory while their young are sent to die in wars. The uneasiness grows and grows, and the citizenry gather in resistance in larger and larger numbers, and become too much to control, and one day the top-heavy empire falls over.”

WHERE IS THE REPORTING ON DEPLETED URANIUM?

ONE of the issues rarely discussed by the Pentagon or the media is the question of the use of depleted uranium in weapons dropped on Iraq. The Trappock Peace Center had a press conference at the National Press Club with Doug Rokke, Ph.D., an expert on the issue. He revealed over 221,000 veterans from Gulf I are on permanent disability, many he believes from DU. Trappock’s release explains: “ Now, soldiers are coming back sick. DU is suspected as a cause. He goes into details about how the soldiers who went to the Gulf were ill-trained and ill-equipped to deal with radioactive munitions. These munitions cause a radioactive and highly toxic dust when used. US, UK, and Australian troops have spread this radioactive material widely in Iraq, to the long term detriment of Iraqi civilians and coalition soldiers as well. ”

His talk is online: mp3 download.

JESSE: "A KILLING FIELD ON THE BACK BURNER"

MORE cholera cases are reported in Liberia. Nigeria now says it will send 1,700 peace keeping troops, with the US expected to follow with fewer in two weeks. Many more Liberians are expected to die in the fighting or by disease by then. South Africa's Mail and Guardian quotes Jesse Jackson as saying "Liberia remains a killing field on the back burner," and on Wednesday also said that the Bush administration's reluctance to deploy troops to strife-torn Liberia proves that race remains "a significant factor" in the way America relates to the world.

MEDIA COMPLICITY IN THE IRAQ WAR ON THE AGENDA

AS I write today, our Globalvision team is packing our gear to move downtown to shoot an all-day discussion of the coverage of the Iraq War, an issue that media outlets are beginning to confront and deal with. It is being sponsored by the Guardian and New York Magazine. I will have a report tomorrow.

DEMOCRACY NOW

YESTERDAY some of that coverage was discussed by Amy Goodman on her Democracy Now program. She had on the Washington Post Ombudsman Michael Getler to discuss the Jessica Lynch story and comment on the false reports on her heroic rescue and the efforts the newspaper made to correct its original reporting. The Post did do a second version of the story early on, before the British Press, BBC, and even Democracy Now. But it was placed way back in the paper and did not have the same impact. The larger problem is

that this whole charade was buried Tuesday during the Jessica Homecoming. At that time, PFC Lynch broke her silence and thanked her military comrades, the US hospitals that cared for her, and even made reference to some unnamed Iraqi civilians for helping her. She did not credit the Iraqi hospital or doctors who saved her life. Her speech has clearly been well vetted. It sounded like a commercial for the army. I wish her well in her recovery. We still need to know more about how the Pentagon produced and sold the phony story of her heroic gun battle and rescue. And why so many media outlets bought it.

Former TV reporter Mike Burke writes to us from the Virgin Islands on the coverage: "Regarding the over-the-top coverage of Jessica Lynch's reunion (even PBS got into the act yesterday), no one is asking what happened to the American POWs that were captured, beaten, and rescued? What happened to their reunions? Remember the picture of the black woman (also from Texas, I believe) who was taken prisoner by the Iraqis? Are the networks practicing some racism here by covering Lynch's welcome and not hers?"

REPORTING ON UNDERDEVELOPED COUNTRIES

IN the "How Others See Us" department, here is a report carried in Pakistan on America—a report cited in Undercurrents: "JANG, PAKISTAN Social conditions in the United States have not improved since 1980, putting the world's only superpower on a par with Poland and Slovenia in the latest edition of an index that measures development in 163 countries. That conclusion was drawn by Richard Estes of the University of

Pennsylvania, who released his findings at a

scholarly conference in Frankfurt, Germany on Monday, the university said in a statement.

”Using data from the United Nations and the World Bank, Estes looked at 40 different factors to come up with his Weighted Index of Social Progress. They include health, education, human rights, political participation, population growth, the status of women, cultural diversity, ‘freedom from social chaos’, military spending and environmental protection.

At the top of the list were Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland; at the bottom, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Sierra Leone. The US ranked 27th.

“Chronic poverty is the greatest threat to social progress in the United States,” Estes was quoted as saying. “More than 33 million Americans — almost 12 million of them children — are poor.” “Contrary to public perception, the majority of the poor in the United States are members of established family households who work full-time and are white. No other economically advanced country tolerates such a level of poverty.”

See this page for more.

MEDIA NEWS

IN our media news: The South China Morning Post reported yesterday that China is losing the battle to control cyberspace “The SARS crisis in China has provided intriguing evidence on how the use of modern communications - particularly the internet and mobile technology - can be used to break down the walls of official secrecy.

“When China sought to conceal the spread of the virus, millions of Chinese turned to their keyboards and mobile phones to access banned foreign reports and censored domestic information. Internet traffic rose by 40 per cent and mobile

phone traffic by 30 per cent. It was the latest round in an ongoing struggle between a long-entrenched regime and a newly emerging civil society for freedom of electronic information, which has intensified in the past two years. The state apparatus has won some heavy-handed victories. More than 20 journalists and civil rights campaigners have been detained on charges such as “using the internet to subvert state power”. Dozens of foreign websites are routinely blocked to anyone attempting to access them through a Chinese server. Some experts calculate that China spent US \$200 million last year on new surveillance equipment. Yet a relatively unfettered traffic in electronic news and comment continues to grow at a pace which no amount of technology can control.”

WASHINGTON POST ON FCC DEBATE IN CONGRESS

“DESPITE its strong record of party discipline, House Republican leadership was unable to prevent a measure rolling back portions of the FCC’s new media ownership regulations from reaching a full vote. The House of Representatives should vote today on a bill that would return the broadcast TV ownership cap to 35 percent from the 45 percent limit adopted June 2 by the commission. If the bill passes, as many expect, it will reach the Senate, where the Commerce Committee has already approved a measure that would revert the broadcast cap while restoring TV-newspaper cross-ownership restrictions. The White House has indicated that it would veto any measures, including spending bills that include media ownership rollbacks. While Democrats and consumer advocates remain confident, some House Democrats are wary of the effect a potentially broad Senate action would have on the tenuous coalition

that has moved the House legislation forward.”

MEDIA BIG DEFENDS BIG MEDIA

NBC Chairman and CEO Bob Wright weighed in yesterday in the op-ed pages of the Wall Street Journal on the media ownership issue challenging the “politically convenient populism that equates ‘big’ with ‘bad.’” Wright says that “the record” shows that the amount and quality of local news and public affairs programming actually increases when networks take operating control of local TV stations. Wright also seeks to change the public perception that networks dictate the “cultural attitude” of the affiliates it operates or that stations absent direct network control are owned by “a mom-and-pop enterprise with offices above the five-and-dime on Main Street..”

ITALY: BERLUSCONI GIVEN MORE MEDIA POWER

THE Financial Times Reports: “Silvio Berlusconi’s government used its majority in the upper house of parliament on Tuesday to pass a media reform bill that critics say gives the prime minister an opportunity to extend his domination of Italy’s media market. At the same time, parliament’s lower house began voting on legislation that Mr.

Berlusconi’s centre-right government depicts as a final resolution of the conflict of interest between his dual role as business tycoon and head of Italy’s government. The media bill allows Mediaset, Mr. Berlusconi’s television company, to keep its three commercial terrestrial channels. Debate rages in Italy over whether, as prime minister, Mr. Berlusconi wields indirect control over . . . almost everything shown on Italian TV.”

IRAN BURIES CANADIAN JOURNALIST

BBC reports that a Canadian journalist who died in custody in Iran has been buried there despite demands for her body to be returned to Canada. Zahra Kazemi, an Iranian-Canadian, died as a result of a severe blow to the head on or after her arrest in Tehran on 23 June. An Iranian presidential report said she died in custody from a brain hemorrhage.

The report failed to say how and why the injury was inflicted, but called for an independent investigator to conduct an investigation. The Canadian Government had expressed concern over Iran’s unwillingness to return her body to Canada, despite the wishes of both her Iranian and Canadian relatives.

