

June 02, 2003

FCC TO PUBLIC: DROP DEAD!

As expected, the FCC voted 3-2 today to change media rules. This release just in: Common Cause, MoveOn.org and Free Press today condemned the FCC's 3-2 vote in favor of relaxing media ownership rules that favor corporate monopolies at the expense of local news outlets and diversity. The groups vowed to continue fighting to take back America's public airwaves by going to Congress and the courts to restore limits on what media giants can own.

"Make no mistake, this corrupt process and ruling fly in the face of democracy and drowns out the voice of the little guy in favor of corporate monopolies," said Eli Pariser, Campaign Director of MoveOn.org.

"Just as other other successful movements have suffered setbacks at the hands of corrupt and shortsighted regulators, so did media reform today. However, we have been strengthened by this fight, and are now prepared to not only reverse these rules, but to begin securing media policies that will serve all Americans," said Free Press president Robert McChesney.

Today is a Media D-Day: a day of infamy for media reformers everywhere. Later this morning, at 9:30, for an expected two hours while protests rage outside, the Federal Communications Commission is expected to pass new media rules and regulations strengthening big media companies and threatening diversity and democracy. You can watch this fiasco on C-SPAN.

Bear in mind that there will be lawsuits responding to the decision from consumer groups who fear its impact and from some broadcasters who say it doesn't go far enough in giving them everything they want. On Wednesday, a Senate Committee led by John McCain, who was sounding critical of the giveaway, holds hearings. In many ways, this fight may just be beginning.

Broadcasting and Cable, a trade magazine which follows these events from a pro-industry perspective, predicts, "the FCC today is slated to open the doors for new TV duopolies in 72 markets, including Cincinnati and 43 other towns where pairings were previously forbidden, according to BIA Financial Network.

THE RUSH IS ON

"THERE will be a rush to pick up stations in markets where only one station is available [for duopolies] under the FCC's new limitations," predicts Mark Fratrik, a BIA analyst.

"With a vote to permit broadcast/newspaper clusters as well, the FCC is set to open local markets to unprecedented levels of concentration. The new rules will ease the prohibition on ownership of both a daily newspaper and broadcast station in the same market, allowing such cross-ownership in roughly 160 of the country's 210 TV markets. Today, such combinations exist in just 46 markets.

"Additionally, the FCC will, for the first time, allow three-station combos in New York, Los

Angeles, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Boston and Dallas, in which 18 or more stations are on the air. Two of the four big broadcast networks, NBC and ABC, will also get extra room to grow with an increase in the cap on one TV group's national reach from 35% of television households to 45%.

The changes are expected to be approved by the commission's three Republicans after a rancorous debate with their Democratic colleagues."

CHALLENGING THEIR LOGIC

THE now indispensable Free Press site Mediareform.net has been opposing the rules and challenging the "logic" of the so-called reformers: "The argument used by proponents to eliminate or relax the media ownership rules is based upon one very simple point: "That the massive increase in media channels through multi-channel television and the Internet has eliminated the need for ownership regulation of broadcast media, because the scarcity of the airwaves is no longer a relevant issue.

"The problem with this claim is that it is not true. The Internet has changed much about our world, but it has not undermined the tremendous market power granted by federal license to use scarce broadcast spectrum. In ten years of the commercialized Internet, despite hundreds of millions of dollars in investment, not a single original commercially viable media content site has been launched. Not one. More important, the value of radio and TV stations continues to grow at a much faster rate than the rate of inflation."

A "RIGHT-WING POWER GRAB?"

FORMER FCC Commission Chairman Reed Hunt says that this is all "the culmination of the

attack by the right on the media." Eric Boehlert interviews Hunt for Salon noting that he sees "something more primal unfolding: an extraordinary conservative power grab that could shape the political landscape for generations.

"For all the philosophical conflict over diversity in the media and the efficiency of the free market, Hunt told Salon this week, the vote is really about an alliance of interests between the political right and the corporate media. "Conservatives," he said, "hope that the major media will be their friends."

COVERAGE: TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE

THIS story has been finally getting some attention on the networks in other media outlets but too late to foster the kind of debate that is needed. Little attention has been paid to the growing resistance and the reasons for it. The Portsmouth, New Hampshire newspaper is just one of the local outlets covering a story that will impact on local news. They include this quote:

"You really should be incensed this is going on," said Portsmouth resident Clifford Taylor, a former general manager of WHEB-FM and WHEB-AM. "The little guy is being squeezed out."

They quote an AP story reporting on the partisan divide in which Democrats Copps and Adelman prefer to keep the current regulations in place, in opposition to Republican Commissioners Powell, Kathleen Abernathy and Kevin Martin, according to the AP.

"Reached this past week, Abernathy's spokesperson, Stacy Robinson, said she could not confirm what the proposed FCC regulations seek to accomplish nor could she provide a statement about Abernathy's opinion on the issue. Calls to the FCC's other media spokespeople requesting

comment on the issue were not returned before deadline.”

This is pretty typical – supporters of the measure meet in private with broadcast interests but then decline to comment or debate in public.

POWER BROKER IN THE SHADOWS

THE NEW YORK TIMES fingers the man behind the push (or is it putsch) to “relax” or “update” media rules as the proponents describe what they are doing. Once again this important story is in the business pages of the New York Times. Stephen Labaton names a Republican lawyer and his law firm as the culprit. His name is Richard Wiley and he presides over a system in which a well-connected law firm places its people in government and then gives them jobs when they leave so that they might better advise corporate clients.

“The firm has the most enviable list of clients in the field. It has supplied more lawyers to the important telecommunications posts in the Bush administration than any other firm, and it is perceived to be the best-connected law practice in the field.

“Over sandwiches in a conference room outside his 11th floor office last Thursday, Mr. Wiley said that he had taken a consistent approach throughout his career.

“Generally speaking, I’m on the side of free speech, the First Amendment and robust competition,” he said.

“Others take a different view.

“Dick Wiley is very gracious and very tough and basically his office is the most well-lubricated office in Washington,” said Reed E. Hunt, a chairman of the F.C.C. during the Clinton administra-

tion who has been at odds with Mr. Wiley on various policy issues and has been critical of the sweeping deregulatory measures expected to be adopted Monday. “If you want to buy access, that’s the place to go. People generally retain Dick to oppose progressive initiatives.”

ON C-SPAN: CHOMSKY AND O’REILLY

MIT linguist and critic Noam Chomsky spoke out against the rule changes in the course of an unprecedented three-hour appearance on BOOK TV on CSPAN 2. News to me was that Chomsky has published 98 books, a record. And they sell. (See C-SPAN’s Book TV website for a full list.) The man is not a machine. Many are updates or earlier works or collections of articles and interviews. By allowing so many different small publishers to bring out his work, he is supporting the entire independent publishing sector. What was impressive were the respectful and thoughtful questions from most callers.

Chomsky was skeptical of all 9/11 conspiracy claims, and forthright on all the foreign policy issues he has written about over the years. It was a remarkable appearance. He said he did not believe he was censored by other media outlets who seem to avoid him like the plague. His genius is the common sense, sound way he explains complicated issues without resorting to rhetoric or losing patience with people who want to criticize him. I am sure the interview will be repeated.

His appearance was an antidote of sorts to an earlier Q & A with bigmouth Bill O’Reilly of Faux News who was calling media critic Todd Gitlin a “pinhead” when I tuned in. He went on to boast about all the good work his “factor” is doing and praised his network’s balance, citing a Pew Study

that claimed that only 43% of the viewers are Republican. (How many to the right of the GOP was not cited) He described himself as “blunt.” And then blasted Amnesty International and the American Civil Liberties Union for having leftist agendas. Bill and Fox, of course, have no agenda. Just “real journalism.”

O,Reilly’s calculated stance reflects the new right-wing media strategy. Tom Paine.com got into that through a profile of Matt Labash, a skillful, crafty and often dishonest debunker who writes for Murdoch’s Weekly Standard. Richard Blows, ex-editor of the ex-George Magazine reports: “Labash recently gave an interview to a Web site called Journalismjobs.com, which regularly talks to journalists about their craft. The interviewer asked, “Why have conservative media outlets like The Weekly Standard and Fox News Channel become more popular in the past few years?”

Conservative news organizations are popular, he admitted, “because they feed the rage. We bring the pain to the liberal media. I say that mockingly, but it’s true somewhat . . . While these hand-wringing Freedom Forum types talk about objectivity, the conservative media likes to rap the liberal media on the knuckles for not being objective. We’ve created this cottage industry in which it pays to be un-objective . . . It’s a great way to have your cake and eat it too. Criticize other people for not being objective. Be as subjective as you want. It’s a great little racket.”

PROTESTING THE G-8

MASSIVE anti-globalization demos confronted the G8 meeting in the water capital of Evian, France. They were actually international or Protesta Global as one Spanish language newspa-

per in New York labeled it on page 1. The networks showed the protests but I only saw one sound bite (on ABC) from anyone about why they were marching. BBC explained this morning that developing countries felt that Iraq and Bush’s bridge-building antics overshadowed other urgent issues like AIDS. The New York Times and most American media focused on American, not world interests. Reported today, s Times: “Rather than rehashing differences with European leaders, President Bush tried to increase pressure on Iran and North Korea to give up their nuclear weapons programs.”

Foreign Policy in Focus explains what protesters want: “Debt and arms control, two important issues on the Evian meeting’s agenda, show that those who gather to protest are not only voicing important criticisms about the illegitimacy of the meeting, but are also proposing vital solutions to international problems. Debt relief, the question of whether wealthy nations should free poorer ones from the burden of making crushing loan payments, has held a central place in discussion in G-8 meetings over the past five years. This year, the debate is back again, but in an unusual form. The United States, which has traditionally been among the most reticent to grant real debt relief, now argues that forgiveness is essential – for Iraq.”

“WEAPONS OF MASS DISAPPEARANCE”

MANY media outlets are still banging the drum over those weapons of mass destruction that have yet to turn up in Iraq. Time magazine now calls them: “Weapons of Mass Disappearance” and asks: “Was America’s spy craft wrong or manipulated?” Congressional committees will soon be

asking similar questions. Paul Wolfowitz, the Rumsfeld aide, told Vanity Fair that the whole strategy focused on the alleged weapons was done for “bureaucratic reasons” for the White House focusing on Iraq’s alleged arsenal as the reason for the war. In reality, a “huge” reason for the conflict was to enable the US to withdraw its troops from Saudi Arabia, he said.”

“A Financial Times editorial bluntly asks: “Where are they?” The paper refers to Iraq’s alleged weapons of mass destruction, which the United States and British administrations considered dangerous enough to constitute a main *causis belli* for the war. Yet “the reality is that, 45 days after the war’s end, all the U.S. and UK appear to have found is two empty trailers suspected of having been mobile bio-weapon laboratories,” the “FT” says.

The Guardian reports that Secretary of State Powell had doubts about the intelligence he drew on about those weapons but Powell now says he was right all along. Dan Plesch and Richard Norton-Taylor reported Saturday that “Jack Straw and his US counterpart, Colin Powell, privately expressed serious doubts about the quality of intelligence on Iraq’s banned weapons programme at the very time they were publicly trumpeting it to get UN support for a war on Iraq, the Guardian has learned.

Their deep concerns about the intelligence – and about claims being made by their political bosses, Tony Blair and George Bush, emerged at a private meeting between the two men shortly before a crucial UN security council session on February 5.

But Powell is now defending that intelligence, according to the NY Times: “I’m enormously proud of the work of our analysts,” he said in a

statement. “The integrity of our process has been maintained throughout, and any suggestion to the contrary is simply wrong.”

ANTI-WAR MOVEMENT BACK IN BUSINESS

AS resistance grows to US occupiers in Iraq with more violent incidents, deaths of US service personnel and marches, a resistance movement is being rekindled here. Anti-war protesters convened in Washington over the weekend to regroup. The Washington Post reported: “The crowd overflowed the pews and packed the aisles at the National City Christian Church on Thomas Circle, saying the war is a long way from ending. Their own battle against what they called imperialistic U.S. intentions is just beginning, participants said.

“Numbering about 1,000, the people who turned up were a cross-section of the diversity that has marked the antiwar movement in the Washington area. They were white and black and Asian and Latino. They spoke English and Spanish, and here and there were snatches of French or German. Whites and blacks were there in large numbers; so were Asians and Hispanics.”

Indian writer Arundhati Roy sent a message to the meeting which said in part: “The US invasion of Iraq was perhaps the most cowardly war ever fought in history. After using the “good offices” of UN diplomacy (economic sanctions and weapons inspections) to ensure that Iraq was brought to its knees, after making sure that most of its weapons had been destroyed, the “Coalition of the Willing” – better known as the Coalition of the Bullied and Bought – sent in an invading army. Then the corporate media gloated that the United States had won a just and astonishing victory!”

REMEMBERING TIANANMEN SQUARE

WHILE US media outlets were showing President Bush cozying up to China's new leader, AFP reported: "Thousands of protesters took to the streets of Hong Kong on Sunday in memory of China's bloody 1989 crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrators and to urge officials to scrap controversial security law plans.

"A spokesman for the Alliance, Lee Cheuk-yan,

said the rally from Hong Kong island's Victoria Park to the Central Government offices downtown was in remembrance of those protesters, mostly unarmed students, who lost their lives in the bloody suppression. "We are also marching to call for a re-evaluation of the June protests by the Chinese government and to call for an end to one-party rule in China," he said, referring to Beijing's refusal to reassess its role in the event." It is doubtful if Bush raised the specter of Tiananmen.

