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WAKING UP TO MEDIA REALITIES

It takes a long time for a slumbering giant to wake up. You prod it. You warn it. You scream at it – and still it slumbers on, in denial, perhaps, or just distracted by living in a culture that specializes in distraction. A few voices don't stir it until many voices start preaching the same message. That's the way it has been with media issues. A few critics and scholars and activists have been banging away but without much reaction, even from socially concerned Americans who have long preferred to whine about media, but not make it a real concern. That may be changing.

That wheel is beginning to turn. Perhaps too late, but turning it is. Last night during a radio interview with my colleague Norman Solomon and a rep from the Consumer Federation of America on WGNU in Boulder, the phone lines lit up. People wanted to talk about it and learn more. There was interest as well as anger. In case you have been living under a rock, you know that our esteemed Federal Communications Cabal (FCC) is about to further the process of giving a handful of media moguls more access to, and control over, something that belongs to all of us: the broadcast spectrum. Just yesterday the free "marketeers" on this Commission committed the first act in the giveaway. Reports today's N.Y. Times:

"The government took the first steps today to permit companies to lease and trade radio spectrum licenses, a move that could result in improved service for the nation's millions of users

of cell phones and other wireless devices."

Paragraph three tells us who really expects to benefit even as the "reform" is called pro-consumer; "The move followed heavy lobbying by the largest wireless carriers, including AT&T, Verizon and Cingular, as well as players on Wall Street like Cantor Fitzgerald that are hoping to serve as brokers or clearinghouses in the creation of a secondary market for swapping licenses.

A bit late in the day, and with just weeks to go before a June 2 decision on broadcasting, activists are mobilizing. In San Francisco, Media Alliance reports: "In collaboration with United for Peace and Justice, MoveOn, and Global Exchange, we circulated a petition to halt media consolidation that over 150,000 people have signed in less than a week. The unprecedented public hearing we convened at San Francisco's City Hall was filled to overflowing. It's clear that folks are outraged."

Writing in the Nation, John Nichols notes that even the FCC's own public comment polling shows an overwhelming MAJORITY against the proposed new rules being pushed through by Chairman Michael Powell, water carrier for the White House on this issue:

"Powell's contempt for public opinion, evidenced by his scheduling of only one official hearing on the proposed rule changes, is so great that he refused invitations to nine semi-official hearings at which other commissioners were present. The hearings drew thousands of citizens and close to universal condemnation of the rule changes.

Likewise, an examination of roughly half the 18,000 public statements filed electronically with the FCC show that 97 percent of them oppose permitting more media concentration. Even media moguls Barry Diller and Ted Turner have raised objections, with Turner complaining, “There’s really five companies that control 90 percent of what we read, see and hear. It’s not healthy.

‘Outraged by Powell’s antidemocratic approach, Common Cause has launched a national petition drive demanding a delay in the vote, while web activists at MoveOn.org are highlighting the issue in bulletins and calling on the “media corps” they organized to monitor media bias during the Iraq war to turn its energies toward stopping the FCC vote. Consumers Union and Free Press, a national media-reform network, have launched a letter-writing campaign to Congress and the FCC from www.mediareform.net.

Our friends at New College in San Francisco are in the lead as well, reporting on their comprehensive website: “The groups involved in media reform/activism have turned up the heat with various phone and email campaigns. Members of congress have signed letters urging FCC commissioner Michael Powell to postpone the June 2nd vote on relaxing remaining corporate media ownership regulations. The pass along info on how to join this attempt to fight back: <http://capwiz.com/ncc/home/>

HOW BUSH USES TV

THE proposed FCC rule changes are being sold as a great benefit for consumers. Most don’t know about it because the coverage has been so thin. But when issues are reported, they are often presented with techniques designed to manipulate—and mislead public opinion. Three years into the

Bush presidency, The New York Times has finally discovered that the Bush White House has become a master of what they call “Stagecraft.” Elizabeth Bumiller says that media manipulation is at the center of its self-promotional strategies.

“Officials of past Democratic and Republican administrations marvel at how the White House does not seem to miss an opportunity to showcase Mr. Bush in dramatic and perfectly lighted settings. It is all by design: the White House has stocked its communications operation with people from network television who have expertise in lighting, camera angles, and the importance of backdrops.”

On Tuesday, at a speech promoting his economic plan in Indianapolis, White House aides went so far as to ask people in the crowd behind Mr. Bush to take off their ties, WISH-TV in Indianapolis reported, so they would look more like the ordinary folk the president said would benefit from his tax cut. “They understand the visual as well as anybody ever has,” said Michael K. Deaver, Ronald Reagan’s chief image maker. “They watched what we did, they watched the mistakes of Bush I, they watched how Clinton kind-of stumbled into it, and they’ve taken it to an art form.”

Who is doing all of this for them? Former network staffers, that’s who. Just three or four people. “First among equals is Scott Sforza, a former ABC producer who was hired by the Bush campaign in Austin, Tex., and who now works for Dan Bartlett, the White House communications director. Mr. Sforza created the White House “message of the day” backdrops and helped design the \$250,000 set at the United States Central Command forward headquarters in Doha, Qatar, during the Iraq war.

Mr. Sforza works closely with Bob DeServi, a

former NBC cameraman whom the Bush White House hired after seeing his work in the 2000 campaign. Mr. DeServi, whose title is associate director of communications for production, is considered a master at lighting. “You want it, I’ll heat it up and make a picture,” he said early this week. A third crucial player is Greg Jenkins, a former Fox News television producer in Washington.”

“They understand they have to build a set, whether it’s an aircraft carrier or the Rose Garden or the South Lawn,” Mr. Deaver said. “They understand that putting depth into the picture makes the candidate or president look better.”

These sales techniques are working and underscore once again that we live in a media-ocracy, a land in which media and politics fuse. The right wing gets this. Their opposition still doesn’t.

HOW TV STUDIOS REALLY LOOK

PERHAPS except for Paul Krugman, the Times in-house economist. He uses a TV metaphor to discuss what he sees as the failure of the war on terror. “The administration’s anti-terror campaign makes me think of the way television studios really look. The fancy set usually sits in the middle of a shabby room, full of cardboard and duct tape. Networks take great care with what viewers see on their TV screens; they spend as little as possible on anything off camera.

“And so it has been with the campaign against terrorism. Mr. Bush strikes heroic poses on TV, but his administration neglects anything that isn’t photogenic.”

THE OTHER SAUDI 9/11 LINK

WILLIAM RIVERS PITT who writes regularly on TruthOut.Org amplifies a parallel that I

raised yesterday – the relationship between what happened in Saudi Arabia the other day and 9/11: “The Bush administration was warned many weeks before the 9/11 attacks that Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda were planning to attack prominent American targets with hijacked commercial airplanes. The Egyptian, Israeli, Russian and German intelligence services delivered these warnings in the strongest possible terms. On the home front, FBI officials like Robert Wright, John O’Neill and the officers in the Minnesota branch were screaming that an attack was impending, that we were unprepared, that we were ignoring the blood-obvious facts staring us in the face.

“Nothing, but nothing, was done. The explosions came, the bodies dropped, and here we are. This is a microcosm of September 11, right down to the Presidential reaction. The CIA calls what happened in Riyadh ‘blowback.’ ”

MORE TERROR POSSIBLE

THE WEEKLY MAIL in South Africa says that Africa is bracing for more terrorism. “Britain suspended flights to and from Kenya last night after the threat level to UK civil aviation was raised to its highest level, ‘imminent,’ following warnings that one of the most wanted al-Qaeda suspects was believed to be planning another attack in east Africa.”

Official skittishness about terrorism has been dealt a small blow by the Associated Press, which denounced the interception of mail from one reporter to another. Now the FBI is in retreat. AP reports: “The FBI has returned an unclassified lab report to The Associated Press, seven months after the document was seized from a package shipped from one AP reporter to another. FBI officials said they would develop guidelines to

address news media material.

“FBI acting general counsel Patrick W. Kelley said an internal disciplinary inquiry was under way but had reached no conclusions. The lab report, which was returned May 8, dealt with materials seized from an apartment in the Philippines rented by convicted terrorist Ramzi Yousef. It had been discussed in open court in two legal cases before it was obtained by the AP.”

JASON BLAIR AFFAIR

THE debate over the Jayson Blair affair at the New York Times continues to rage. Last night, Nightline took it up, trying to deal with the racial aspects of it. Was this a case of affirmative action gone awry? There seems no doubt that Blair was a beneficiary of the paper’s attempts to promote diversity, but more than that was going on. Editor Raines addressed this issue this way at a meeting of Times staffers:

“Our paper has a commitment to diversity, and by all accounts, he appeared to be a promising young minority reporter. I believe in aggressively providing hiring and career opportunities for minorities. Does that mean I personally favored Jayson? Not consciously. But you have a right to ask if I, as a white man from Alabama, with those convictions, gave him one chance too many by not stopping his appointment to the sniper team. When I look into my heart for the truth of that, the answer is yes.”

Nightline noted one possible implication which could influence the future of affirmative action: “As the Supreme Court is set to make a potentially historic ruling on affirmative action in the next few weeks, the reaction to his story exposes some of the fault lines in this country’s attitudes on race.”

But beyond the race aspect, it has to be noted that Blair was also hanging out with Raines, dating a friend of the editor’s wife. He was seen as a golden boy, not just a black one, and from what I have read, he had the moves, the manners, and the skills of maneuvering through the minefields in those hallowed newsrooms. Sridhar Pappu offers some real insight in the pages of this week’s New York Observer:

“Because of his transgressions, Jayson Blair has entered the Janet Cooke-Stephen Glass territory of being less than an actual person, reviled by his hurt and somewhat terrified colleagues who head for the hills, worrying for the sanctity of their profession; he becomes a symbol of the peril reached when potential and journalistic ambition is prized more than experience; when youth is moved out-of-whack with experience; when cultural diversity carries the day; when the strange arrogance of a great journalistic institution becomes gnarled and unchallengeable.

“I won’t be surprised if Howell Raines is sent packing after a while, just long enough so that the Times can plausibly deny that they buckled to pressure. Pippu notes: “According to one Times source, the company’s board of directors has “become aware” of the growing discontent in the newsroom, spurred and pricked by the Blair disaster from roilings to overt complaints.”

A PULITZER PRIZE?

SIDNEY ZION, another ex-Timesman, says, “Jayson Blair should get a Pulitzer Prize for his role in exposing ... The New York Times.” Writing in the Daily News he pointed to what he considered much more serious in the unofficial history of the paper: “read what The Times said he did, read it from top to bottom in their four-page indict-

ment, and what have you got?

“Nobody died, nobody was libeled, nobody was framed by anything Blair wrote.

“Compared to what?

“How about the Holocaust? The Times never covered the destruction of the Jews of Europe. Not because it had a reporter who figured out it was best to ignore the slaughter. This was a decision made from the top. Arthur Hays Sulzberger, the grandfather of the current publisher, decided that the newspaper of record would ignore the greatest massacre in history lest the readers of The Times consider it “a Jewish paper.”

MORAL POLITRICKS

A UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA linguistics professor, George Lakoff, believes that our understanding of events is shaped by psychology with roots in the idea of family. He lays this out in a book called *Moral Politics*. His ideas seem to be fascinating people I know on the West Coast and appear in an interview on TomPaine.com. You should read the whole piece.

He told Sharon Basco: “There are two different ideal models of the family that I’ll call a Strict Father Family and a Nurturing Parent Family... And this metaphor maps those models of the family onto our national moral and political life.

And what you get are two very, very different models of the family, and with them two very, very different models of politics.”

“Basco: You write that ‘liberalism has a view of discourse that puts it at a disadvantage.’ This brings to mind the often-heard notion that conservative talk shows, whether radio or TV, are effective in part because they put their arguments in black and white and in staccato, single-syllable terms.

“Lakoff: It’s very important to know that if you take someone else’s words or ideas and negate them, even if you are against the ideas ... you support the ideas by negating them.

“Now, this is how Fox News works. They will say, ‘We are fair and balanced. We will have a liberal and a conservative.’ But we have a conservative host! What the host does is, the host frames the questions, so that the liberal, even if he denies them, still supports the frame. For example, ‘Are you against the president’s proposal for tax relief? What? You are against tax relief?’

“‘We’re just going to tell you what’s right, and if you don’t like it we’ll punish you!’ The conservative think tanks have worked for 40 years now, developing not just language, but modes of thought that the language fit. And they have learned it very well, and the folks at Fox News have learned it very well.”

