

May 22, 2003

CAN WE BEAT THE FCC?

The countdown to consolidation continues – and the campaign to stop the FCC’s further giveaway of the airwaves is stepping into high gear. After a slow start, and inattention by activists, a de facto alliance is emerging between organizations like Moveon.org and the National Rifle Association. In one 12-hour period, we had the rock bands R.E.M and Pearl Jam join the campaign to delay the FCC vote along with one of the most cantankerous and combative conservatives in the bully pulpit of media power. You heard it right, now jamming with Pearl Jam is none other than that former punker with Tricky Dick Nixon’s band, William Safire.

As Rupert Murdoch, whom the mogul critics in England call “the dirty digger,” prepares to tell Congress today why he must add to his inordinate media power by buying the Direct TV satellite provider, Safire fires off a round aimed at Capitol Hill: “Ah, but aren’t viewers and readers now blessed with a whole new world of hot competition through cable and the Internet? That’s the shucks-we’re-no-monopolists line that Rupert Murdoch will take today in testimony before the pussycats of John McCain’s Senate Commerce Committee.

Safire continues: “The answer is no. Many artists, consumers, musicians and journalists know that such protestations of cable and Internet competition by the huge dominators of content and communication are malarkey. The over-

whelming amount of news and entertainment comes via broadcast and print. Putting those outlets in fewer and bigger hands profits to the few at the cost of the many.”

His op-ed advertorial today identifies “an ambitious 36-year-old lawyer whose name you never heard,” Kevin Martin, as the swing vote on the commission. And who is he, you ask? Uncle Bill tells you: “He and his wife, Catherine, now Vice President Dick Cheney’s public affairs adviser, are the most puissant young ‘power couple’ in the capital.”

And why don’t we know what he is up to. Answer: They don’t want to tell us: “The F.C.C. proposal remains officially secret to avoid public comment but was forced into the open by the two commission Democrats. It would end the ban in most cities of cross-ownership of television stations and newspapers, allowing such companies as The New York Times, Washington Post, and Chicago Tribune to gobble up ever more electronic outlets. It would permit Viacom, Disney and AOL-Time Warner to control TV stations with nearly half the national audience. In the largest cities, it would allow owners of “only” two TV stations to buy a third.”

WHY ARE CONSERVATIVES CONCERNED?

SO why is Safire, who prefers bashing Democrats and promoting hawkish foreign policy initiatives, telling us this? Isn’t he a conservative?

Yes he is, BUT he argues: “The concentration of power – political, corporate, media, cultural – should be anathema to conservatives. The diffusion of power through local control, thereby encouraging individual participation, is the essence of federalism and the greatest expression of democracy.”

He admits to a certain discomfort in joining this cause – but join it he has. “That’s why I march uncomfortably alongside CodePink Women for Peace and the National Rifle Association, between liberal Olympia Snowe and conservative Ted Stevens under the banner of ‘localism, competition and diversity of views.’ That’s why, too, we resent the conflicted refusal of most networks, stations and their putative purchasers to report fully and in prime time on their owners’ power grab scheduled for June 2.”

MOVING ON THE MEDIA

SAFIRE doesn’t mention that members of Moveon.org and other groups are calling for public protests on the issue on May 30th at the radio stations owned by Clear Channel Communications, one of the companies that has benefited from media deregulation outlets. Progressives criticize Clear Channel on aesthetic and political grounds. Moveon.org explains this stance:

“Clear Channel’s monopolistic practices have accelerated the homogenization of our airwaves. The company promotes cookie-cutter style radio that has urban stations throughout the country seemingly playing the same seven songs. It shuts out independent artists who can’t afford to go through high-priced middlemen and is responsible for taking the practice of voice tracking to new heights. Voice tracking creates brief, computer-assisted voice segments that attempt to fool the

listener into thinking that a program is locally produced, when in fact the same content is being broadcast to upwards of 75 stations nationwide from a central site.

“Clear Channel also uses its stations to promote its right-wing political agenda. After September 11, the company came to the public’s attention when executives circulated a list of blacklisted songs including John Lennon’s ‘Imagine’ and Cat Stevens’ ‘Peace Train.’ This year Clear Channel became one of the first media companies in recent times to sponsor a political rally – they sponsored pro-war rallies in cities around the country before and during the war on Iraq. Another ‘Rally for America’ is being organized in Huntington, West Virginia for Memorial Day weekend.”

CAN THE FCC BE STOPPED?

ACTIVISTS say, “We increasingly think there is a chance we can derail the FCC. Several members of Congress have come out against the FCC. Look for new newspaper and TV ads on the subject this week.” For more on all of these issues tune in to Bill Moyers NOW program on PBS Friday He will be reporting on a Center for Public Integrity report that looks at the close ties between the FCC and the industry it regulates. The Center’s director, Chuck Lewis, will be on the show.

As for Rupert Murdoch, the New Yorker’s Ken Auletta looks at his empire this week. In an interview with the magazine, he reports: “The largest segment of cable-news viewers is made up of conservatives. According to a Pew Research Center poll, 46 per cent of Fox viewers identify themselves as conservative, compared with 40 per cent of CNN viewers. But, because Fox viewers are more intense, they watch 70 per cent more cable news than CNN viewers do. This intensity of

viewing on Fox helps account for its ratings success, since length of viewing and not just total number of viewers is counted by the Nielsen ratings service. Fox's core viewers are conservatives, and they would seem to identify with Fox as their club for news."

RICH GUYS OPPOSE TAX CUT FOR RICH

THE NEW YORK TIMES devotes a two-column headline on page one to the tax cut bill deal on Capital Hill brokered by Dick Cheney. Bush wanted a \$726 billion cut. He ended up with \$318, that is less than the \$350 billion ok'd by the Senate. Yet the "compromise" is being projected as a big political win. Interesting, isn't it, when some of the most articulate critics of the President's new tax cut bill are coming from two Americans who would benefit from it most. Money manager and billionaire George Soros and fellow plutocrat Warren Buffett have taken the lead. Buffett was on Nightline last night (His company is a big investor in Disney, the company that owns ABC)

Nightline explained: "What worries Buffett in looking at the Senate plan (under which the dividends an individual receives would be 50 percent tax free in 2003, 100 percent tax free in 2004-2006, and then fully taxable again by 2007) is how it would "further tilt the tax scales toward the rich." Buffett spoke for himself in the Washington Post:

"The annual Forbes 400 lists prove that – with occasional blips – the rich do indeed get richer. Nonetheless, the Senate voted last week to supply major aid to the rich in their pursuit of even greater wealth. The mental flexibility the Senate demonstrated in crafting these zigzags is breathtaking. What it has put in motion, though, is clear: If enacted, these changes would further tilt the tax

scales toward the rich."

NOT YALE TOO!

"THE new terror threat level was enacted, not based on specific information, officials admit, but on a general perception of the "threat environment." This leads to some jittery jumps in news judgment. The New York Post links a 5p.m. bombing at Yale Law School on its front page to a speech that President Bush gave – five hours earlier and 45 miles away – in Connecticut. Buried in the story is this paragraph: "FBI officials told the Post there were no indications that international terrorists were involved." And speaking of real international terrorists, the US government is denouncing Al Jazeera (again) and lobbying the government of Qatar to censor its broadcasts of Al Qaeda tapes. The latest tape broadcast yesterday was from bin Laden crony Dr. Ayman al-Zawaheri who calls for more attacks on American and British interests and Jews.

BLAIR BRANDS TIMES A "SNAKE PIT"

DISGRACED New York Times reporter Jayson Blair called the New York Times a "snake pit." In an interview with the New York Observer, he gives some insight into his own turbulence and instability. At the same time, he says "What I am a symbol of is what's wrong with the New York Times and what's been wrong with the New York Times for a long time." He boasts that he "fooled some of the most brilliant people in journalism."

Newsweek reveals that Blair has literary agent David Vigliano to shop his story to publishers and movie studios. More tellingly, the magazine cites his friends about the demons he is fighting and his efforts to seek treatment for substance abuse.

SUPPORTING CHRIS HEDGES

I AM still not sure what happened at that meeting at the New York Times yesterday between reporter Chris Hedges and his bosses. Hedges has been in the news himself after an anti-war speech he gave at a Rockford College graduation ceremony was booed. I am waiting to hear from him. Yesterday he welcomed our support with a note: “Thanks! Nice always to remember I am not alone.”

What did Hedges say at Rockford? Here are some excerpts: “I want to speak to you today about war and empire. Killing, or at least the worst of it, is over in Iraq. Although blood will continue to spill – theirs and ours – be prepared for this. For we are embarking on an occupation that, if history is any guide, will be as damaging to our souls as it will be to our prestige, power, and security. But this will come later as our empire expands and in all this we become pariahs, and tyrants to others weaker than ourselves. Isolation always impairs judgment and we are very isolated now.

“The real injustices, the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land, the brutal and corrupt dictatorships we fund in the Middle East, will mean that we will not rid the extremists who hate us with bombs. Indeed we will swell their ranks. Once you master people by force you depend on force for control. In your isolation you begin to make mistakes.

“Fear engenders cruelty; cruelty, fear, insanity, and then paralysis. In the center of Dante’s circle the damned remained motionless. We have blundered into a nation we know little about and are caught between bitter rivalries and competing ethnic groups and leaders we do not understand. We are trying to transplant a modern system of politics – invented in Europe characterized, among other things, by the division of earth into independent

secular states based on national citizenship – into a land where the belief in a secular civil government is an alien creed. Iraq was a cesspool for the British when they occupied it in 1917; it will be a cesspool for us as well. The curfews, the armed clashes with angry crowds that leave scores of Iraqi dead, the military governor, the Christian Evangelical groups who are being allowed to follow on the heels of our occupying troops to try and teach Muslims about Jesus.”

BOOS AND JEERS

HEDGES stops speaking because of a disturbance in the audience. Rockford College President Paul Pribbenow takes the microphone: “My friends, one of the wonders of a liberal arts college is its ability and its deeply held commitment to academic freedom and the decision to listen to each other’s opinions. (Crowd Cheers) If you wish to protest the speaker’s remarks, I ask that you do it in silence, as some of you are doing in the back. That is perfectly appropriate, but he has the right to offer his opinion here, and we would like him to continue his remarks. (Fog Horn Blows, some cheer).

Hedges continues: “Once in war, the conflict obliterates the past and the future, all is one heady intoxicating present. You feel every heartbeat in war, colors are brighter, your mind races ahead of itself. (Confusion, microphone problems, etc.) We feel in wartime comradeship. (Boos) We confuse this with friendship, with love. There are those who will insist that the comradeship of war is love – the exotic glow that makes us in war feel as one people, one entity, is real, but this is part of war’s intoxication.”

WORSHIPPING DEATH – HEDGES CONCLUDES

“IN wartime when we feel threatened, we no

longer face death alone but as a group, and this makes death easier to bear. We ennoble self-sacrifice for the other, for the comrade; in short we begin to worship death. And this is what the god of war demands of us.

“Think finally of what it means to die for a friend. It is deliberate and painful; there is no ecstasy. For friends, dying is hard and bitter. The dialogue they have and cherish will perhaps never be recreated. Friends do not, the way comrades do, love death and sacrifice. To friends, the prospect of death is frightening. And this is why friendship, or let me say love, is the most potent enemy of war. Thank you.”

(Boos cheers, shouts, fog horns and the like.)

NATION BLASTS NEW YORKER

ANOTHER prominent New York publication is under fire – The New Yorker. And the critic in this case is The Nation magazine which carries a cover piece by Daniel Lazare lambasting the magazine’s support for the Iraq War. He writes, in part:

“The growing number of articles that the magazine has run since 9/11 on the subject of terrorism and the Middle East have been equally skewed. Whenever The New Yorker uses the word ‘terror’ or one of its cognates, for instance, it is almost always in an Arab or Muslim context. While a Nexis search turns up numerous references in the

magazine to Palestinian, Egyptian and Pakistani terrorism since the Twin Towers attack, it turns up no references to US or Israeli terrorism or, for that matter, to terrorism on the part of Christians or Jews. A Nexis search over the same period reveals that the word ‘fundamentalism’ appears almost always in an Islamic context as well. In this modern update of Saul Steinberg’s ‘View of the World from Ninth Avenue,’ religious fanatics are mostly Muslim, occasionally Christian, but – despite all those Uzi-toting settlers – never, ever Jewish.

“Examples of such one-sidedness range from the subtle to the egregious – and, as is often the case, it is the former that are most interesting. In an article last September about Gershom Scholem, the famous scholar of Jewish mysticism, the novelist Cynthia Ozick concluded with an impassioned peroration on the subject of Scholem’s twin religious and political obsessions: ‘In Kabbalistic symbolism, with its tragic intuition that the world is broken, that all things are not in their proper places, that God, too, is in exile, Scholem saw both a confirmation of the long travail of Jewish dispersion and its consolation: the hope of redemption. In short, he saw Zionism.’ ”

Many of us have gotten so used to nationalist rhetoric of this sort that we no longer notice. But can anyone imagine The New Yorker celebrating Islam in such a fashion and winding up with an equally passionate embrace of Arab nationalism?

