

September 10, 2003

# THE DUMBING DOWN OF CABLE TV

**W**olf Blitzer was asked last night on Bill Maher's HBO late night comedy program if he thought CNN was liberal. Within a second, this CNN icon responded with a firm "NO." That should puncture anyone with any illusions that this souped up version of what was once derided as Ted Turner's Chicken News Network sees itself as in any way an ideological adversary to Rupert Murdoch's Fox (Al Franken whose best selling book takes on lies on Fox summed up his feelings in a straight faced manner by calling Murdoch's men a group of A-holes. Faux contributor Bill Kristol was on the show lamely defending Bush, not Fox.

Interesting isn't it that the only programming offering tough criticisms of the Administration with any regularity is on comedy channels

## **BRITNY IS NOW A PUNDIT TOO**

**MAHER** also lit into CNN for all the attention it paid to Madonna kissing Britney Spears. Blitzer responded by saying that all mainstream newspapers ran the picture. Maher came back with a quote from Spears who later appeared on CNN's Crossfire program where she called on one and all to support our president unquestioningly. Britney on Crossfire? The mind boggles.

The merger between newsbiz and showbiz is complete.

## **THE REAL CANCUN - NOT THE MOVIE**

**THIS** morning BBC featured a long report from Cancun, Mexico, where the WTO Ministerial meetings and the protests against them get underway. CNN featured no report at all. It just wasn't news. There was nary a word on what activists are calling "The Monsoon on Cancun" in alliterative tribute to "The Battle in Seattle." These economic issues that affect the majority of the world's people are somehow not news in the United States of Amnesia.

At issue, of course, are continuing agricultural subsidies to farmers in the US and Europe that make it impossible for third world nations to compete, even as the West demands that the developing world (or underdeveloping world) to be more precise opens its markets to cheaper goods from our producers. No wonder the poor are getting poorer. BBC showed the protests but also how authorities who run these meetings now seek out spots that can be guarded against protesters because of their remoteness. (The last WTO meeting was in Doha, Qatar). Incidentally, an alliance between India, China and South Africa is also demanding changes in world trade rules.

Writing from Cancun for Alternet, Tom Hayden sets the scene; "Cancun itself, a lavish symbol of distorted development and narco-trafficking, has elected a Green Party mayor to begin regulating the flow of foreign investment. Nevertheless, the

U.S. wants to “liberalize” the tourism sector, while the European Union hopes to eliminate the need to obtain permits for hotels, restaurants and tourist operations. Cancun’s water supply was privatized by an Enron subsidiary in the mid-Nineties. The water, according to environmental specialists, is dirtier than before but costs consumers four times as much. There is also a push to open rich genetic diversity and forests surrounding Cancun to corporate prospectors under privatization provisions of the Agreement on Trade-Related Intellectual Property (TRIPS).

“In hopes of salvaging a victory in Cancun, the U.S. recently ended its opposition to a plan for poor countries to obtain generic medicines to treat HIV and a handful of other life-threatening diseases. But that deal, in response to global grassroots pressure, is far from nailed down, and will be overshadowed by other conflicts this week.”

### THE LANGUAGE IS A TURN-OFF

**ONE** problem for journalists and ordinary people is the density of the language used in these debates. It is a foreign tongue to most people in the world, and a turnoff to news people as well. Aziz Choudry writes in ZNET: “It’s enough to make your eyes glaze over. Modalities. Conditionalities. Most-favoured nation. Rules of Origin. Phytosanitary Standards. TRIPS. TRIMS. GATS. WTO. APEC. FTAA. NAFTA. Trade negotiators, governments, the media and many non-governmental organisation (NGOs) are pumping out material brimming with an alphabet soup of acronyms and jarring technical jargon.

“The arcane language of trade negotiations and global economics resembles the incomprehensible utterances of those who, in a state of apparent reli-

gious ecstasy, believe themselves moved by a divine force – and speak in tongues. Whether it is a belief in salvation by God or the global free market economy, “true believers” frequently feel that they alone have the truth, the light and the way. The inaccessibility of this language remains a big plus for the economic interests – governments and corporations – behind initiatives like the WTO and FTAA as they seek to mould the world so that global capital can do what it likes, when it likes, how it likes, and with whomever it likes.”

### WHY TV FAILS TO COVER THE WORLD

**WE** can blame the WTO for its “secret code” but we also have to ask why other TV channels offer so little background programming. The of course say that they are merely giving viewers what they want but there is a clear INSTITUTIONALIZED ideological filtering at work here as every independent producer and documentary maker learns when they find the cable spectrum so hostile to in-depth programming about the world at large. What we have here is a deliberate pattern of dumbing down the American people – not by commission but omission. Most viewers don’t know about it because it is not to criticize or even comment upon what you never see.

In our case here at Globalvision, we have had run ins with public television executives who once told us “human rights is an insufficient organizing principle for a TV Series” (That was years ago when we were exposing Saddam Hussein’s human rights abuses, prematurely it appears.) The same language greeted a proposal we submitted THIS YEAR for a timely series on global health threats. Despite the SARS outbreak – and there is now a new case in Singapore – we were

told that global health is not a sufficient “organizing principle.”

### **THE WAY THEY THINK**

**NOT** all the cable channels get to this level of specificity in their rejections. They just says stuff like “Not for Us” or send out thanks, but no thanks letters. Now, Mediachannel has obtained a most revealing document from a professional who sells to cable outlets. It is a letter to a friend of ours who was seeking help placing programs on a deadly global issue (forgive my deliberate vagueness) to the channels we are constantly being told show how diverse our TV system is.

We had a recent experience with one channel which turned down a timely program on an African issue after the New York Times ran a story that reported news viewing down. (This always happens during the summer) That just “proved” the prejudices of those who steer us away from subjects of substance.

This latest document reveals the thinking, and the political mindset of people in this business executives who have been ordered to KISS – keep it simple and stupid, and in effect to focus only on what the government focuses on ie. terrorism. Note: I took out the names of the channels referred to.

### **“INTERNATIONAL MATTERS DO NOT RATE**

**“I’M** afraid that the commercial cable sector is not currently acquiring or commissioning much “social issue” programming. Occasionally, you’ll see a BBC special which deals with an important international issue, but I can’t see this program getting placement.

“The programmers that we regularly speak with

are constantly telling us that international matters (other than terrorism) do not really rate for them. Additionally, you would need to have a very strong, central character and a well defined narrative. Additionally, people only really want programs which deal with the conflict in the Middle East.

“I’m sorry to say it, but the market we’re dealing with is increasingly less interested in anything other than cheap formats and sensationalistic topics (UFO’s, feral children, etc).”

### **WHY WE LIVE IN A “BUBBLE”**

**AND** so there you have it, as we approach the second anniversary of 9/11, when more about our world is needed so urgently. It doesn’t get any more explicit. It is deliberate. The “commercial cable sector” is closed. (And I am sure the person who wrote the letter would have happily tried to get the series in question on the air, but feels it is futile.) You will recall that at the time of the 9/11 attacks, it was widely suggested that Americans had been living in a bubble. Now you know why.

Also note the emphasis on story telling built around a “Strong central character.” This speaks to the ways in which Hollywood narrative technique has driven out information or issue driven programming. This is only more evidence of entertainment drives program choices in a post-journalism era. PBS programs for the most part have bought into this way of thinking as well.

### **PUTTING THE BLAME WHERE IT BELONGS**

**BUT** let’s stop blaming the people and put the blame where it belongs, on media companies who care not one whit for the public interest or in any mission to inform. The world is simply shut out

on most channels, and increasingly on the news where “world in a minute” packages of “hot” news agency footage are used in lieu of real reporting or analytical reporting.

The myth is that TV networks only give people what they want. Increasingly the public is sending another message: We Hate The Big Media. But that’s the last thing the media companies want to hear. Perhaps they will hear it when there is strong centrally defined character saying it. (Hey, programmers, there is this news dissector guy.)

### THE KILLINGS CONTINUE

**IN** the news this morning, there was more bloodshed in the Israel-Palestinian conflict. After twin terror attacks in Israel yesterday, Israel bombed a leader of Hamas’s home today, missing him but killing his wife, daughter, son and a bodyguard. The US networks reported on the body count, and the horror in the streets of Tel Aviv and Gaza City.

BBC interviewed Israeli politician Yossi Bellin, one of the architects of the failed Oslo agreements (Its anniversary is September 11, too) who criticized the Israeli government for its refusal to follow the road map and negotiate with Arafat who, whatever Israel’s think of him, is the Palestinian’s leader and national symbol. This is not a majority view in Israel and in fact pressure to kill or exile Araft will now build. One reason that we don’t really get to fully appreciate the horror of all this, with more emphatic coverage of the victims is that events happen so quickly that there is little time for journdlists to do more than keep up with the tit for tat violence.

In this case, as in others, human beings are suffering. Israeli individuals live in fear and are often victimized for who they are, not what they have

done. Israel as a country tends to get reported on only in terms of its occupation of Palestinian lands. This is wrong. Little coverage humanizes its people or tells of their achievements and aspirations. The terrorist incidents obscure all this and remain as counter-productive as they are deadly.

On the other hand, the lives of Palestinians and how they are forced to live is not widely understood. Amnesty International has just released a report saying “Israel must end its policy of closures and restriction of movement. Israel must put an end to the imposition of disproportionate and discriminatory restrictions on Palestinians’ movement in the Occupied Territories which have crippled the Palestinian economy and caused widespread poverty, unemployment and increasing health problems.

“Closures, blockades, checkpoints, curfews and a barrage of other restrictions imposed by the Israeli army on Palestinians have made even short journeys between towns and villages difficult, dangerous and often impossible – effectively confining some three and a half million Palestinians to a form of town arrest.” The report is called “Surviving Under Siege”

### IRAQ ATTACK

**ANOTHER** American was killed in Iraq and many wounded in fresh incidents. Centurion Associates, a private security firm says the situation there is deteriorating, contradicting the soundbytes we are hearing from US officials: “There has been a dramatic worsening in the security situation in Baghdad, with attacks against the coalition forces remaining a daily occurrence, this coupled with the general lawlessness makes the protection of the organizations such as media, aid agencies, NGOs and busi-

nesses a more challenging task. These organizations are no longer considered by the local population as impartial and are aligned very definitely with US interests within Iraq.”

John Donvan last night on Nightline spoke of the US “Iraqicizing” its operations there. Another new word “Iraqinization.”

### **EDITOR AND PUBLISHER SAYS JOURNALISTS SHRINK RESPONSIBILITY**

**MEDIA** magazines like Editor and Publisher are monitoring the reporting of Iraq and giving it a failing grade. Editor Greg Mitchell writes: “Some time in the next two weeks, David Kay, head of the Iraqi Survey Group, is expected to finally release a crucial report on his findings so far in his search for weapons of destruction.

“I am confident that when people see what David Kay puts forward they will see that there was no question that such weapons exist, existed, and so did the programs to develop more,” Secretary of State Colin Powell said Sunday. “We did not try to hype it or blow it out of proportion.”

“Since no weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) have been found in Iraq, close observers now report that Kay is likely to drop on the media a massive weapon of his own: hundreds or thousands of pages of summaries and documents purporting to prove that Saddam Hussein had WMDs recently (and hid them) and/or had numerous WMD programs underway that we succeeded in pre-empting.

“In the parlance once used by Howell Raines, Kay thereby will “flood the zone” and hope the press portrays what may be largely assertion – not fact – as compelling proof. Would the media possibly fall for this? There are disturbing indica-

tions that they would.” Mitchell also reports on a long AP analysis that went back to Secretary Powell’s UN speech making the case for war. It shows that almost every point was false, fabricating or fudging evidence. Mitchell calls the reporting of that event a “shirking of journalistic responsibility.”

### **THE 9-II ANNIVERSARY IS HERE**

**TOMORROW** is the 9/11 anniversary. Dick Cheney will parade through Ground Zero. Tomorrow night I will be at Riverside Church for the start of a major conference on the politics of 9/11. Jim Ridgeway has a good sum up of the consequences in this week’s Village Voice. Today family members will march on the World Trade Center calling for a response to their unanswered questions. I will tell you more about that. One family member, Kristen Breitweiser, writes about the Showtime DC 9-11 film which dramatizes what the Bush Administration says happened. She calls it a “mind-numbingly boring” propaganda film in a piece on Salon. She writes in part:

“Despite the title, the film only budgets approximately 10 minutes to the actual morning of 9/11. Most of the movie is spent cataloging the myriad Cabinet-level debates as to whether to declare “war” against terrorism and how to effectively sell that to the American people.

“It is understandable that so little time is actually devoted to the president’s true actions on the morning of 9/11. Because to show the entire 23 minutes from 9:03 to 9:25 a.m., when President Bush, in reality, remained seated and listening to “second grade story-hour” while people like my husband were burning alive inside the World Trade Center towers, would run counter to Karl

Rove's art direction and grand vision.”

### A NEW RESOURCE

**VISIT** Canada's ColdType.Net for a free major excerpt from Media Channel advisor Greg Palast's best seller “The Best Democracy Money Can Buy. That book has now been on the best seller lists for six months.

### YOUR LETTERS

**SCOTT SMITH** writes from Vancouver: “ This is the amazing part of the story about DC911 .... it wasn't produced in Canada to avoid union dues ... we have unions here and the production was union made. The reason it was filmed here was because our government subsidized the film. So just as Bush is angry about work leaving the USA for countries with unfair (subsidized) business practices, he lets a movie be made about himself in another country with subsidized work-force!!! haha thanks for the jobs”

Mark R writes praising my piece on DC-911 being carried today by Alternet” “A few films HAVE been made that are more accurate about the events of 911 than the Viacom effort; “Aftermath: Unanswered Questions of 9/11” – Guerrilla News Network; “The Great Deception” – Vision TV of Canada. And Michael Moore is working on “Fahrenheit 911.”

Kate Sibley writes “Having spent the last four weeks preparing for and weathering the Telluride Film Festival, I am back to reading your daily column with great interest and trying to catch up on the news that our media don't see fit to print (pretty much all of it, as far as I can tell...).

“I am particularly struck by your and others' comparisons between Iraq and Vietnam, having just seen most of Errol Morris's new film, FOG OF

WAR, regarding Robert McNamara and his recollections of and regrets regarding the Vietnamese War. It was an eerie feeling indeed to see footage of Lyndon Johnson stating, “This is a war not just for the hearts and minds of these people, but more importantly for their ultimate security” (I'm paraphrasing here since I can't remember the exact words, but I was deeply struck by the fact that we've heard the same words almost verbatim from this sham of a president).

“Just as interesting as the film were the reports I received about the conversation between Mark Danner and Robert McNamara himself following the film, wherein McNamara refused to comment on the present situation. It seems that despite his professed enlightenment regarding Vietnam, he is unable or unwilling to apply those lessons to today's conflagration. That would seem to me to be a lesson not learned very well, if one can only apply it in hindsight to something that is far enough in the past to be seen through a personal lens of regret. If we can't apply lessons learned to the present as well as to the past, how useful are those lessons, really? One of the things McNamara said in the film was that he learned to respond to questions with the answers that he wanted to make, rather than with “real” answers (again, my paraphrasing). So I guess he learned at least one of his lessons well... Keep up the good work, Danny. You help us stay focused on the important stuff. “

### VIVA VICTOR JARA

**FINALLY** some good news in time for one 9/11 anniversary – but in another country. Here's the headline: “Chile's National Stadium to be Renamed for Victor Jara.” He's the musician considered the Bob Dylan of Chile who was mur-

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## **MEDIA DIARY** DANNY SCHECHTER

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dered in the aftermath of the 9/11 coup in that country. Jara was, along with many other tortured in that stadium. A few years later I personally confronted CIA chief William Colby about Jara and asked if he knew who he was. He paused, and then smiled smugly. At least the bastard was forced to acknowledge him. He denied CIA complicity in the

coup – evidence of which is now public and available in Peter Kornbluh’s fine new book on the subject called “The Pinochet File: A Declassified Dossier on Atrocity and Accountability.”

And so we remember you Victor and all the victims of 9/11’s here and abroad. I will covering the events later today and report on them tomorrow.

