

U.S. media interests: Champions of profit, propaganda and puffery

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April 30, 2002—A crisis without precedent is underway in the United States. And its consequences will be far graver than those wrought by the U.S. presidential election of 2000 and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The collapse of the Jeffersonian “free and uncensored press” in America endangers the liberties of all Americans and, arguably, citizens from all walks of life around the globe.

As the U.S. prepares to invade Iraq and preemptively strike anywhere in the world it feels threatened, the only remaining barrier to monstrous U.S. totalitarianism is a sickly and crippled U.S. media, an aggressive foreign media, and the hope that the heretofore somnambulant American public will awaken from its stupor.

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis once wrote, “Fear of serious injury cannot alone justify suppression of free speech and assembly. Men feared witches and burned women. It is the function of speech to free men from the bondage of irrational fears.” Not so in 2002, because irrationality and indoctrination sell. ABC’s Diane Sawyer’s interview with a para-psychologist who talks to the “dead” gets big billing. U.S. media interests regularly report unsubstantiated government claims about terrorist capabilities and threats to the populace. They ignore and, indeed, mock the message of peaceful anti-establishment protests around the world and here in the U.S. They editorialize on issues that please advertisers and the profit margin. They plagiarize days’ and weeks’ old news stories from the foreign and trade press and claim them as their own. They pound home the message of “just get over it,” whether “it” is election malfeasance, intelligence and defense failures or corporate theft. In these environs, can it be long until a daring American author mimics Czeslaw Milosz and pens the American version of *The Captive Mind*?

With precious few exceptions, most notably the nation’s “City Papers,” independent Internet sites—like the Independent Media Center—and grassroots broadcasters such as Pacifica, U.S. print and broadcast organs from the New York Times to the Los Angeles Times, from NBC to Fox, and from AM radio bands to FM bands, spew out a vile and banal concoction of information that numbs the mind and homogenizes the thought processes of a U.S. citizenry scurrying about to support the “war effort.” So-called “news programs” seek to pacify and assure during the commute, the thunderstorm, the shopping spree, the murder. Weather, roads, guns, cars, food are all endowed by newsreaders with character as if those “things” are conscious entities. As Herbert Marcuse so adroitly pointed out, in this environment people don’t “see” themselves, they project themselves into “things.” Viewers are commodities to the U.S. media interests. “Thought” need not apply here.

Fantasy is Fact

Instead of reporting on how many people are killed in various grassroots insurgencies against U.S.-backed tin horn dictators around the world, networks now report how well movies do at the box office. Little wonder, considering how the news networks are so tightly welded into Hollywood's infotainment empires. Even PBS is not immune from such corporate infiltration, even though it would have you believe differently during its long and painful fund drives. Consider the recent ignoble treatment of Wall Street Week host and founder Louis Rukeyser. Because AOL Time Warner could not find a time slice on CNN to plug its Fortune magazine, it simply gobbled up Rukeyser's show for the magazine. Even PBS's famed documentaries are not immune to such corporate power moves. The highly-acclaimed wildlife show Nature has been forced to drop its long time narrators in favor of personalities like Julia Roberts and Meg Ryan, whose major contributions to environmental studies were their respective complaints that life in Mongolia and the hills of Thailand was just not as cozy as that in Beverly Hills, California.

So it's no surprise that U.S. media interests enthusiastically embrace all the activities that move money from one hand to another, but none that move a contrary, novel or critical idea from one mind to another. U.S. media interests certainly have their counterparts: the retroviruses whose ingenious method is the ability to deceive the host cell into operating on a routine basis as if the retrovirus is a trusted ally—a supporter.

“We work for you!” exclaims General Electric's affiliate, NBC News Channel 4 located in the Washington, DC, viewing market. “You and Channel 4, Working Together” is the slogan. “Start your day at 5:00 AM with us,” says NBC, and they solicit viewers to end that day with them at 1:00 AM the following morning. It's the same refrain at CBS, NBC and ABC affiliates. Ending a day with the networks means submitting to the musings of late night talk show hosts Jay Leno and Dave Letterman fawning over smarmy politicians like Dick Cheney and John Ashcroft. If the hangover from that weren't painful enough, the stupefying advertisements and “news” inserts that come with viewing or listening to any broadcast programming from U.S. media interests leaves the viewer punch-drunk. The nauseating blend of politics, sound-bites, comedy, murder, “reality,” “Hollywood,” “news,” “graphic footage”——intermixed with the viscous commercialism that plays on procreation, death, and productivity——put forth by owners and news readers of infotainment interests stands as one of the most mercenary acts in capitalist history. And, more the pity, this charade of news reporting is performed by those whose intelligence quotient is far below the highest paid athletes in America.

In the midst of this wretched stew, comes the truncated 17-minute network newscast consisting of 750-word propaganda diatribes masquerading as editorials. And out there on the AM and FM radio bands, the fare is three-to-four-hour invective radio commentaries, interspersed with yuk-yuk blather with publicity-seeking politicians. A prime example is Viacom's syndicated morning radio show——simulcast by MSNBC——hosted by the desiccated Don Imus, who creeks and groans like an old wooden galleon. Not only does he offer a radio and TV platform to people like former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to advocate the assassination of Yassir Arafat, but he entices professional journalists to aid and abet in such obvious politically-inspired polemics.

This same script is played out on CBS, ABC, Fox, MSNBC, PBS and a hundred other channels, newspapers and AM and FM bands across the land. And so it has become with U.S. media

interests who, in the wake of 9–11 (itself a worn-out and pedantic term like Al Qaeda) and in conjunction with propagandists in the current U.S. government, seek to transform the U.S. populace into a nation of Chauncey Gardners. But then again, can a parasite be blamed for thriving on the docility of its host, its supporter, in this instance the American public?

Who Tells You What to Think?

Columbia Journalism Review and Media Channel track the owners and minions of U.S. media interests at <http://www.cjr.org/owners/> and www.mediachannel.org, and a visit there is most enlightening. NBC, General Electric's marionette, owns an array of properties from financial institutions in France to long distance telephone services in Hungary. General Electric is a partner with Starbucks Coffee in Talk City. Under the Walt Disney Group entity resides ABC, which recently featured an investigative piece on World News Tonight on whether time travel is possible. This was not a news story but a movie advertisement: Disney was preparing to release its remake of the movie, "*The Time Machine*." It must have been tough for the quintessential Peter Jennings to turn into an Entertainment Tonight host for a Hollywood gossip and gabfest show masquerading as a nightly news broadcast. Disney also owns interests in petroleum and natural gas production facilities.

The New York Times owns the Boston Globe and has a partial interest in a sports franchise, the Boston Red Sox. Viacom is the holder of CBS and runs everything from Star Trek properties to Spelling Television. The Washington Post co-owns the International Herald Tribune with the New York Times and, along with the LA Times, runs a news service. Gannett, publisher of USA Today, owns "insider" publications U.S. Army, Air Force and Navy-Marine Corps Times, as well as Defense News and Military Market. They also partner with defense contractor General Electric on web ventures.

And then there's The Unification Church's Washington Times newspaper listed as a "project" on the Rev. Sun Myung Moon's website. The Washington Times, along with the Dow Jones' Wall Street Journal (Jones also owns 20 newspapers around the U.S.), cater to a powerful constituency: God, Money, Corporations and Republicans, although not always in that order.

Rev. Moon claims that Jesus Christ visited him in 1935 and, according to The Unification Church website, "Jesus asked him to complete the task of establishing God's kingdom on earth and bringing His peace to humankind." Apparently Bush the First and Bush the Second agree with Moon. The elder was on the Moon payroll as a speechmaker and the younger claimed in a presidential debate that Jesus Christ was the greatest philosopher of all time.

Finally, no mention of media would be complete without Fox News Corporation. As reported by MediaChannel, Rupert Murdoch's empire is so vast that he claims, "Our reach is unmatched around the world. We are reaching people from the moment they wake up until they fall asleep."

Pay No Attention to What the Media is Doing Behind That Curtain

With incest in the U.S. media as flagrant as it is—combined with its subservience to the current U.S. administration and military—is it any surprise that events are scripted to suit the outcome of

the U.S. economic and national policies? The recent U.S.-backed Venezuelan coup exposed the U.S. media interests as complicit partners in deceiving the American public. FAIR at www.fair.org documented the print media's bovine coverage:

“When elements of the Venezuelan military forced president Hugo Chavez from office last week, the editorial boards of several major U.S. newspapers followed the U.S. government's lead and greeted the news with enthusiasm. In an April 13 editorial, the New York Times triumphantly declared that Chavez's ‘resignation’ meant that ‘Venezuelan democracy is no longer threatened by a would-be dictator.’ Conspicuously avoiding the word ‘coup,’ the Times explained that Chavez ‘stepped down after the military intervened and handed power to a respected business leader . . . ‘ Three days later, Chavez had returned to power and the Times ran a second editorial (4/16/02) half-apologizing for having gotten carried away.”

When the corporate megaliths took over the news networks, the first casualties were the foreign bureaus. No longer would network journalists be able to build up a base of sources and contacts within various capital cities and financial centers. The result is that the networks increasingly rely on government spokespeople for “news” that is really nothing more than propaganda. Take Afghanistan, for example. Network and newspaper reporters are confined to Kabul because U.S. military planners have convinced them the countryside is unsafe. Not knowing any better and lacking any in-country contacts, they remain in Kabul and dutifully file as news copy every statement regurgitated by a suspicious military public affairs officer. As Robert Young Pelton indicated in an interview with Salon <www.salon.com>:

“Well, the military hates the media. The conundrum is that we live and die for the Constitution and one of the elements of the Constitution is freedom of the press—the right of the democratic public to make decisions based on a free flow of information, without censorship, without people rewriting history. And basically since the Vietnam War, the military realizes that the press is the enemy, because the press is actually faster and more intelligent than the military is. They can assess a military situation long before the military figures it out.”

This story has been replayed in cities and countries around the world. Last June, the world media bought the story issued by the government of Nepal that a love sick, drunk, and deranged Crown Prince executed his entire family, including his mother and father—the King and Queen. Not reported was that incoming King and new Crown Prince were brutal thugs bent on turning the country into a virtual province of neighboring India. The Hollywood-inspired news media liked the O.J. Simpson and Robert Blake angle of the story instead and, without even a cursory independent investigation, decided the official government explanation would suffice. It's the same story line in Washington, DC.

Rewriting the Record

The recent pro-Palestinian and anti-globalization march in Washington was ignominiously ignored by the U.S. media interests. Only C-SPAN covered it live. However, when the ranks of the protestors swelled to over 75,000, C-SPAN cut away its coverage to air a taped three-day old speech by the head of the International Monetary Fund. Undoubtedly, C-SPAN, like many other networks that have offered unbiased coverage of Middle East news, felt the wrath of a powerful

lobby group called CAMERA—the Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America—a virtual propaganda arm of the Israeli government known for berating any reporter who criticizes Israel. It effectively uses its financial clout to get wayward media elements to fall in line with Israel's party line.

Another dangerous trend is cable news addiction to Bush. The Three Stooges of cable news broadcasting—CNN, FoxCable, and MSNBC—all break away for live coverage whether Bush is hamming it up in the mountains of New York State or disembarking from his helicopter. Gone underreported is the doctoring of White House transcripts by staffers who excise Bush's intellectual blunders at press conferences and speeches and who, in effect, are rewriting the record. And U.S. military movements in support of the failed coup in Venezuela received scant attention. History is replete with examples of authoritarian leaders surrounding themselves with cameras and one-sided news coverage. Consider Leni Riefenstahl's constant filming of Hitler and how the coverage extended to every German movie house. Or Soviet TV's ad minutiae coverage of Brezhnev, Andropov, and Chernenko. Every time they visited a tractor factory in Minsk or a poultry plant in Kiev, the story was prominently featured on the nightly "Vremya" news.

As U.S. military planners, politicians and corporations continue their global pacification campaign against a now trumped up Al Qaeda, they have already planned for the invasion of Iraq and, perhaps, other members of the Axis of Evil. To garner public support for boundless U.S. military operations—from which new exploitable markets magically appear—the war machine has received the enthusiastic support of U.S. media interests whose task, it seems, is to keep the public busy and acquiescent. In reality, most Americans are extraordinarily averse to war, yet the U.S. media interests upon which they rely for "thought" are the integral operatives for U.S. war propaganda and concomitant public indoctrination. Nazi celebrity Herman Goering would be right at home in the U.S. in 2002, working with U.S. media interests to suppress dissent and bring home a glorious victory for the Homeland:

"Why of course the people don't want war! Why should some poor slob on a farm want to risk his life in a war when the best he can get out of it is to come back to his farm in one piece? Naturally, the common people don't want war: neither in Russia, nor in England, nor for that matter in Germany. That is understood. But after all it is the leaders of the country who determine the policy, and it is always a simple matter to drag the people along, whether it is a democracy, or a fascist dictatorship, or a parliament, or a communist dictatorship . . . Voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is to tell them they are being attacked, and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger."

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