

Democracy on the Rocks: The Impending Media Megopoly

—by Sharleen Leahey

“We are the envy of the world in our medium, in its depth, diversity, breadth, information sources, indeed most of our stuff is the source for the rest of the world. I think that’s in part because we do enjoy the benefits of size.”

—Michael Powell, FCC Chairman
April 4, 2003

At a recent family gathering I found myself in a conversation about the war in Iraq. My nephew, an intelligent young man in his thirties, casually remarked, “Yeah, I was against the war too but now that it’s over I’m glad we went in there.” Surprised by his change of opinion and his complacency about it being ‘over,’ I responded: “The war is not over by any means . . . there’s an awful civilian crisis happening as we speak . . . widespread power outages, lack of safe drinking water, severe shortages of basic medicines, unexploded cluster bombs, not to mention a cholera outbreak threatening the lives of thousands of small helpless children.” My nephew looked at me in shocked silence as did most of the guests within earshot of my descriptions. Their silence spoke volumes. In the next day or two I began an informal survey among friends and neighbors asking whether any of them had seen or heard US media reports about the life-threatening chaotic conditions facing civilians in Iraq in the weeks since the beginning of the American and British occupation. Most had heard and seen very little, if anything at all. It became clear that the information I was getting from the BBC television and internet news services was *not* the same news being offered to American citizens by our mainstream news media.

As Paul Krugman wrote in a recent *New York Times* column (*The China Syndrome*—May 13, 2003), “during the Iraqi war many Americans turned to the BBC for their TV news. They were looking for an alternative point of view—something they couldn’t find on domestic networks.” Krugman also pointed out that the BBC is owned by the British government and, instead of blindly supporting the government’s policies, tried hard to stay somewhat impartial. On the other hand, corporate-owned networks such as Fox News appear to be on the verge of substantial rewards for their exuberant pro-war coverage with the impending relaxation of media ownership rules now being considered by the Federal Communications Commission. Ironically, in the race toward corporate media consolidation, a commercial network such as Fox News has greater incentive to curry favor with those in power than does a government-owned network such as the BBC. As Krugman concluded: “America’s TV networks are privately owned, yet they behave like *state-run* media.”

FCC Chairman Michael Powell’s belief in U.S. corporate media’s superiority notwithstanding, anyone clicking from channel to channel in an attempt to survey the quality and content of television news offered by the major networks might be struck by its *sameness*.

It may come as no surprise to most Americans that the vast majority of television stations are now controlled by five huge media conglomerates. What *is* a surprise is that in a few more days the Federal Communications Commission is expected to further deregulate the industry, stealthily moving toward complete privatization.

It is hard to see how the FCC's mandate to protect the interests of the public (the actual *owners* of the public airwaves) by encouraging diversity is being served by the current proposals now under consideration. On June 2nd, 2003 FCC Chairman Michael Powell and several other Republican commissioners are expected to usher in the most sweeping changes to the rules governing media ownership in the history of our nation. Yet despite its claims that democratic principles and 'the public good' are its guiding lights, the FCC *did not release this plan to the public!* Nor were there official hearings for public input scheduled until dissident commission members like Michael Copps began holding their own. Independent media critics like Media Watch (<http://www.mediawatch.com>) are warning that "our rights as citizens could be totally erased and corporations would own and control all media systems." If this plan is allowed to go forward, we may be witnessing the beginning of the end of our fragile and tattered democracy.

Our country, we are told, is the greatest democracy the world has ever known. But as Senator Olympia Snow of Maine recently pointed out on May 13, 2003 during Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee hearings on the new FCC rules, a true democracy must encourage "*antagonistic voices*" expressing opposing views to engage in vigorous debate on a wide spectrum of relevant issues affecting our society. The proposed rules, if allowed to become law, threaten to silence the few voices of dissent we still have left.

With the expected support of FCC Commissioner Michael Powell, the current rule limiting the ownership of a single television network to 35% of a market's stations would be raised to 45%. Smaller broadcasters like James Goodmon, president of Capitol Broadcasting Co. (which owns and operates five local TV stations in North Carolina and South Carolina) warned that smaller broadcasters and network affiliates will be gobbled up by the big networks which will limit local control of programming. "Media giants are trying to replace localism and community standards with financial opportunity and corporate objectives," he said.

Another new proposal would eliminate existing cross-ownership regulations which now prevent companies from owning a newspaper and a broadcast station in the same city. "Merging the dominant local newspaper with a major local TV station is dangerous to our democracy because it combines the key watchdogs who keep an eye on each other," said Gene Kimmelman, publisher of *Consumer Reports* magazine.

Let us not forget that no matter how bad we think corporate media is . . . things *can* get worse. As dissident FCC Commissioner Michael Copps told Bill Moyers in a recent interview: "If you take this to its logical conclusion, you could end up with a situation where one company owns the newspaper, the television station, the radio station and the cable system."

As New Jersey Senator Lautenberg pointed out in the recent Senate FCC hearings on May 13th, the anti-democratic legacy of the last major deregulation of the radio industry in 1996 has been made painfully *clear* by the emergence of Clear Channel which now controls over 1200 radio stations, and is continuing to grow. Their enormous power over the music industry and their cut-throat corporate practices have not only constricted the diversity of music playlists but have led to the intimidation and blacklisting of artists such as *The Dixie Chicks* for the 'crime' of exercising their free speech rights to dissent against the Bush Administration's policy of unilateral pre-emptive war. For a media corporation to enhance its ties to the Bush family political empire by using its enormous power to destroy the careers of recording artists at will, makes a mockery of the U.S. Constitution. Few can deny that the 1996 Telecommunications Act and its resulting deregulation of the radio industry, has had a chilling effect on artistic freedom for artists working in the United States of America. Will the proposed new FCC rules help usher in another era of witchhunts reminiscent of the anti-communist hysteria of the 1950s?

During the recent Senate hearings, one pro-deregulation Senator tried to sell his colleagues on the idea that the new technologies, such as satellites and digital cable, are providing the public with more media *diversity* than ever before. Fortunately, the majority of Senators on the Committee were not buying this distorted analysis. In an ironic twist, we have a 24-hour news cycle offered on more cable and network channels than have ever existed in the history of broadcasting, yet these channels are dominated by a mere handful of huge conglomerates, all belonging to the same club of men whose first priority is to protect corporate wealth and political power. Although entertainment choices may be broader (though the quality has a lot to be desired), our news and public affairs programming, so crucial for a healthy and vibrant democracy, has continued to decline, becoming ever narrower.

In today's corporate environment our news comes pre-packaged, delivered by anchormen (and *embedded* reporters) who regularly wrap themselves in the American flag. In a statement delivered at an FCC Public Forum on Media Consolidation last month, Nancy Snow, profesor of Communications at California State University, stated:

"In the federal government, the largest public relations division is inside the Pentagon where government specialists provide Monday through Friday feeds to the national media. . . . In the corporate media environment today, the best journalist is increasingly the dutiful journalist. . . . those news sources that bring us the news are increasingly dependent on their close ties to official Washington and other corporate sources of news. . . . broadcasting used to have a clear mandate for public service that's been lost in the fog of consolidation."

What makes the proposed FCC changes so controversial is not only the effect it may have on our democracy but also the fact that it happens to be the most *underreported* news story of our time. Veteran journalist Bill Moyers notes, "of the major broadcasters, only ABC reported the FCC's recent decision to review media ownership rules . . . and that report was at 4:40 in the morning!"

In an April 2003 interview with Moyers' weekly PBS show *NOW*, FCC Commissioner Jonathan Adelstein stated:

"This is a story that is going to affect how every American is going to see, hear and read about the news . . . we've heard from a lot of journalists who said they felt very intimidated about doing this story. This is one of the most important things the FCC has ever undertaken . . . yet we see virtually nothing on any of the major media outlets . . . which is somewhat disturbing"

On May 14, 2003, the morning after the Senate hearings on the proposed changes (which were broadcast only by the independently-owned television network C-SPAN), a search on MSNBC's news website showed *no coverage whatsoever* on the hearings. Instead, MSNBC's top three stories of the day were "*The Sexual Politics of Hyenas*," "*Matrix Reloaded Draws Fire*," and "*Paul McCartney's Stolen Diary Returned*." (So much for Powell's belief in mainstream media's "depth, diversity and breadth!") Fortunately, there is a growing independent media movement, readily accessible in cyberspace, which *is* covering not only this story but many other stories the corporate media chooses to water down, distort or ignore completely.

The constant feeding of pro-corporate and pro-military propaganda packaged as "news" being broadcast night and day into millions of American minds by a handful of overgrown conglomerates is a present-day reality which has already had profound consequences for our nation and the world. That special interests, closely tied to a small group of far-right Republican politicians now occupying the White House, have hijacked our public airwaves to pursue an agenda bent on world domination to satisfy the greed of a few already wealthy men is a situation we ignore at our peril. In the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11th, 2001, the question "*Why do they hate us?*" became a familiar refrain on radio and TV talk shows. Twenty months later, I think back to my recent encounter with my nephew who still looks to mainstream American media for his information and I am reminded of veteran journalist Walter Lipmann who once lamented: "*We The People' have become a bewildered herd.*"

—Sharleen Leahey

Approximate number of newspapers in North America:	1,800
Approximate number of magazines in North America:	11,000
Approximate number of radio stations in North America:	11,000
Approximate number of television stations in North America:	2,000
Approximate number of book publishers in North America	3,000
Number of companies owning a controlling interest in the media listed above in 1984 :	50
Number of companies owning a controlling interest in the media listed above in 1987 :	26
Number of companies owning a controlling interest in the media listed above in 1996 :	10

Source: Transcript of *Bill Moyers Journal* – 10/25/02

For more information and independent news sources:

<http://www.mediawatch.com>

<http://www.projectcensored.org>

<http://www.democracynow.org>

<http://news.bbc.co.uk> (BBC)

<http://www.indymedia.org>

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