

The media reformers are coming to town

NEW YORK, MAY 8, 2005 – What would the makers of the MGM classic “Meet Me in St Louis” think of the conclave planned next weekend in St ‘Louie’ in that Red State many call ‘Missoura.’? The 1944 movie featured songs by Judy Garland and depicted a slice of America as it awaited the 1904 World’s Fair, which heralded the promises of a new century.

Mass media had then yet to totally dominate our culture, although we had had experiences with the yellow journalism of William Randolph Hearst and, yes, the man that endowed journalism’s primo prize, Joseph Pulitzer. Pulitzer founded his national newspaper company in St Louis in 1878.

No one then could have imagined how thoroughly Big Media would affect and infect our political life. Media has now become a key issue in this new century.

The river town always had a rich media culture, The state’s favorite son and one of this country’s great writers, Mark Twain, wrote for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. In 1881, he published a letter he wrote to President Garfield to support anti-slavery crusader Frederick Douglass for public office. He later led the anti-imperialism league against that Vietnam-before-Vietnam, the U.S. war on the Philippines.

It is a town with its own feisty Journalism Review which reports this month: “A new set of rules at the St. Louis Post-Dispatch on alcohol and drug use on the job is aimed at curbing a longtime hazard for both employees and the company. But some employees say the rules, which call for searches and forced drug testing, is a violation of their civil rights.”

I am sure the media activists responding to Free Press’s call for a second national Media Reform Conference will leave their drugs at home because the assemblage of so many activists and “big names” in media criticism in one place will produce its own high. (I’ll be on hand reporting for Mediachannel.org, showing my movie WMD and participating on a panel.)

In its first outing, the conference drew thousands of activists but tended to

preach to the choir. I wrote at the time: “we can’t help but notice that the bulk of those attending hail from one region of America’s political landscape – occupied by progressives, Democrats and left-leaning independents. Yet, ironically, the largest single constituency (more than 300,000) to respond to the fight against the FCC rule changes was organized by an icon of the right, the National Rifle Association. Others on the right equated Big Media with Big Government and responded with understandable conviction against too much power in too few hands.”

Will this weekend’s conference speak to some of these “conservative” concerns? We all know we need to do more than stage rallies for the converted. Can we bridge the partisan divide?

It now falls upon reformers to reach out to and include more Americans who are disenchanted with media, be they conservative or liberal, church-going or not, in the campaign. Some surveys say that as many as 70% of the American people are, for differing reasons, very unhappy with our media.

What is promising is the formation of new coalitions with organizations like Common Cause and others now enunciating new principles for what kind of media order we want in a “Bill of Media Rights” – not just focusing what we are against. This is great leap forward. The full list of coalition members can be found at: www.citizensmediarights.org.

Since I was not party to the conference planning process, I don’t want to be a ‘nattering nabob of negativity’ – to quote disgraced former Vice President Spiro T. Agnew. A great deal of hard work, aided and abetted by lots of funding, has come up with an impressive event. (Why foundations love to fund conferences more than media projects has also mystified me, but that’s an issue for another time.)

It also may be important now to try to consolidate the movement, however disparate and uncoordinated that’s out there, before broadening it too much.

(“We go to war with the army we have,” says SecDef Rumsfeld about a more visible conflict.) But, as an organizer of the Media and Democracy Congresses in the 90’s, I know it’s easier to put on a good show than to undertake the follow-up organizing that’s needed. It’s also easier to bring together people you agree with than those you don’t.

In the case of media reform, outreach is key if we are to win legislative victories and make more inroads. So far, we have had some big breaks in the courts with rulings slapping down the FCC. But there are many battles to come

in Congress, boardrooms and at the municipal and grass roots level.

We need to involve or at least hear from outspoken conservatives on the issue like William Safire the, ex-New York Times OpEdster, who opposed media concentration and Senator John McCain, who spoke up in the Senate. We need to connect with critical media insiders like Norman Lear, Ted Turner and even Barry Diller, all of whom are in some respects moguls for change? Have we done all we can to involve the Internet industry and progressive bloggers? Defending the digital domain must be one of our issues.

Is Michael Moore coming to discuss his impact and ideas and perhaps interact with other independent filmmakers on building up a culture of critical media? Will the documentary brigades and the IDA, ITVS and AIVF be there? Can we get the proliferating number of film festivals to hold forums on media issues? Can we hear from people who are launching new channels?

And where is Jon Stewart, who is as trenchant a media critic as there is and a popular one to boot? Have we reached out to Hollywood and other satirists beyond Al Franken?

We have many differences among us to debate. Will there be panels within the activist world that discuss strategy and get at the sharp differences and disagreements that exist? Will MoveOn be there to dialogue with its critics or can the competing media websites like Free Press, Media Matters for America, and, yes, Media Channel which has advocated a post-partisan approach, be able to confront each other and perhaps find ways to collaborate? I'd like to see NPR, Pacifica, low power radio and Air America engage on ways to get progressive voices to more listeners.

I would be fascinated to hear industry flacks like Benjamin Compaine, who argues there is no media concentration problem, go mano a mano with Bob McChesney, who insists there is.

Will our teachers be there to discuss ways that media literacy can be integrated into our schools at a time that leave no child behind seems to be leaving all critical curriculums behind? We need to involve PTA's because parents know most kids spend more time in the living room than the classroom. They can be a formidable force in this movement.

How about hearing from the broadcast unions and guilds and involving them and other media insiders in this fight? The same survey I cited that found 70% public dissatisfaction with our media also found roughly the same percentage of dissatisfaction within the media itself.

I would love to hear from critical mainstream journalists like Seymour Hersh, Maureen Dowd, Paul Krugman, and Helen Thomas. Did we invite network correspondents turned critics Tom Fenton, ex-CBS, or Arthur Kent, ex-NBC? And also media critics from overseas including representatives of Al Jazeera and third world media activists could add important perspectives. Are the more a-political citizen journalism or public journalism folks involved enough? They represent the media of the future.

Media reform is an issue that can unite so many sectors in American life and energize global activism. Can we find ways to build on our pervasive consensus of complaint with the media to build a critical mass for change? Can we convince the anti-globalization movements to put media power on their agenda in an era of global media cartels?

The media system is vulnerable as never before. Note how many of the big media companies themselves are in crisis with credibility scandals, profits falling, audiences disappearing and structures disaggregating. Many are de-merging, admitting errors and being fined. They are in disarray. “Desperate housewives” is a metaphor for their distress; “Runaway bride” for our dissatisfaction.

This is THE time to act on behalf of an enraged majority that is being cheated by greed in the executive suites and the crap on the air. Now is the time to fight to for real news, to take back PBS, support independent media, and reclaim the airwaves.

It is possible. This is a time when the tide of public opinion is turning against the B Movies that rule our lives – the Bushes, the Blairs and the Berlusconi’s. but also cBess, nBc, and aBc. Fox is not the only problem.

Many in the public are rejecting their offerings along with the war they sold us in Iraq.

This is the time to offer a new vision for media change. Ultimately, we are talking about renewing our democracy.

Just before the last reform conference I wrote, “Ours is an ambitious agenda. Can it be realized? Of course. But that will take the kind of commitment, financing, and strategy that is often missing in a movement that is more comfortable being critics of Big Media than competitors for their mass demographic.

“Too often, our laments echo through the movement without reaching the audience beyond. It is much easier to cling to alternative media outlets that

take our side than carry the fight on to popular radio talk shows, local TV and radio outlets and the letters columns of our newspapers. We also need to engage the mainstream, not retreat from it.

“We hope some of these issues will be raised in Madison, (read, St. Louis). We hope that we can find ways to work together and get beyond the rhetoric and recycling of old ideas to reach the new audience that has risen to support of media reform.”

Years ago Mark Twain wrote: “The first time ever I saw St. Louis I could have bought it for six million dollars, and it was the biggest mistake of my life that I did not do it.” Today it is not for sale and neither are we. But let’s hope our media activists will use the time we have there to put the issue on the agenda, make media matter and media reform possible,

Missouri is the “Show Me State.” Let’s show America what we can do.

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