

Why we need a Media and Democracy Act

NEW YORK, MAY 23, 2005 – The National Conference for Media Reform held last week in St. Louis was a smashing success in generating the momentum that the organizers from Free Press hoped for. Bill Moyers's powerful sermon of a speech during the closing session on Sunday morning was aired on C-SPAN and hurtled through cyberspace faster than that proverbial speeding bullet.

The threat to PBS was put on the agenda with a powerful challenge to Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) Chairman Kenneth Y. Tomlinson. Tomlinson's big-foot strategy at PBS and NPR is being exposed for what is – a right-wing coup that will, if it is successful, drive what remains of more diverse or outspoken programming off the public airwaves.

That came through very clearly.

What has yet to penetrate the progressive community is a deeper understanding of the structural problem here, and the institutional stagnation that PBS has suffered for years. Unmentioned at the conference was the fact that it was Bill Clinton – not Attila the Hun or Bill O'Reilly – who appointed Tomlinson and, for that matter, Michael Powell. As a TV producer with years of experience producing programming for PBS that we are now trying to save, I can tell you how flawed the system has been, how timid, and how difficult to work with.

But I won't.

Suffice it to say, anything less than reinventing PBS and imbuing it with a new more courageous spirit and mission will not have the desired effect.

I know. I've been there and done that.

We all like Big Bird, but I am not sure how many adults will go to the mattresses for him. (Well, maybe for Miss Piggy!)

Remember, too, it was the Clinton administration that supported the Telecommunications Act of 1996 with the deluded expectation that consumers would benefit by breaking up media monopolies to achieve more competition.

What we got instead was more media concentration.

What was not appreciated then was how powerful media power is. We have

to recognize that the media industries have shoveled oodles of moolah into political campaigns on both sides of the aisle. They are bi-partisan and equal-opportunity power brokers.

They are about their bottom line, not advancing democracy.

So, the media problem is not at its heart a partisan one – it's about interests, not issues. Reforms can't be based on slogans because they have to try to transform structures. As one critic of half-way incremental reformism put it in a newspaper circulated at the conference, we don't want to end up "painting lipstick on the pig."

This is why I believe we need a comprehensive approach, an umbrella strategy that can translate what we really want into a legislative package that many different constituencies can sign onto, with the principle that unity is better than disunity, à la the Contract for America. (Note how Hillary Clinton and Newt Gingrich are now best buddies.)

My idea: A Media and Democracy Act to package proposals for an anti-trust program to break up media monopolies; a funding strategy for public broadcasting and the independent producing community (perhaps financed with a tax on advertising); reinstatement of an updated fairness doctrine; free broadcasts for political debate across the spectrum; limits on advertising and monitoring for honesty and accuracy; guarantees for media freedom in the public interest; media literacy education in our schools; provisions for free wireless; media training and access centers; more support for media arts, etc.

This list is endless. No one group has the clout to put its priorities on the agenda without support from others, so why not make everyone a stakeholder in the process? Politics is the art of compromise. That's why a Media and Democracy Act that incorporates all these concerns can have appeal across the partisan divides of politics as well as the political divides within the media and democracy movement.

It is not my job to write the Act. That work can be done by media reform advocates and by members of Congress and their staffs who know the arcane world of legislation. All I know – or remember – is a chart I saw in elementary school on "How A Bill Becomes A Law." As I recall, it made no reference to the power of lobbyists, lawyers and snake-oil salesmen on K Street.

One purpose of such an Act is not to expect to prevail the first time out, but to show what is needed and is possible, how government policy shapes the regulatory framework, and how national priorities and funding could be used

to make a media system that can truly serve the public interest and informs our democracy.

A Media and Democracy Act is an idea that can help move this movement. It underscores the importance of working together to make media matter and to show a diverse range of interest groups that we can win if we work together.

It's an idea whose time is coming.

I would prefer for it to happen in our lifetimes.

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