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Fear

& Favor

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ColdType



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The PR agency’s promises are a stark reminder that the news is, in many ways, a collision of different interests. The traditional tenets of journalism are challenged and undermined by other factors: Advertisers demand “friendly copy,” while other commercial interests work to place news items that serve the same function as advertising. Media owners exert pressure to promote the parent company’s self-interest. Powerful local and national interests demand softball treatment. And government power is exerted to craft stories, influence content – and even to make up phony “news” that can be passed off as the real thing.

Journalists, on the whole, understand these pressures all too well. A survey of media workers by four industry labor unions (Media Professionals and Their Industry, 7/20/04) found respondents concerned about “pressure from advertisers trying to shape coverage” as well as “outside control of editorial policy.” In May, the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press released a

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survey of media professionals that found reporters concerned about how bottom-line pressures were affecting news quality and integrity. In their summary of the report, Bill Kovach, Tom Rosensteil and Amy Mitchell wrote that journalists “report more cases of advertisers and owners breaching the independence of the newsroom.”

This⁵

Fear & Favor report is an attempt to illustrate this growing encroachment on journalism with real examples that have been made public – not an exhaustive list by any means, but a reminder that such pressures exist, and that reporters serve the best interests of citizens and the journalistic profession by coming forward with their own accounts.

In Advertisers We Trust

USA Today (5/18/04) served notice that corporate advertisers have a remarkable influence over what we see on the TV screen. As the paper noted, in the media world “there is worry that the flood of grisly images flowing into living rooms from Iraq and elsewhere will discourage advertisers.

A General Motors spokesperson explained that her company “would not advertise on a TV program [just] about atrocities in Iraq,” while an ad exec explained that “you don’t want to run a humorous commercial next to horrific images and stories.” A Ford representative said the company keeps a close eye on news images that accompany its ads, saying, “We’re monitoring the content

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and will make decisions based on the nature of the content. But we don't have a lot of control.”

But they do, of course. Commercial media wouldn't exist without, well, the commercials. And in order to keep the revenue flowing, media outlets increasingly blur the lines between their advertising and editorial divisions.

● When a super-sized corporation comes to town, it brings along an ad budget to match, and newspapers sometimes seem more than willing to suspend the rules of critical journalism to ingratiate themselves with the wealthy new arrival. When furniture giant Ikea opened a new store in New Haven, Connecticut, the New Haven Register cranked out 12 Ikea stories in eight straight days – accompanied by at least 17 photographs and a sidebar on product information – with headlines such as “Ikea’s Focus on Child Labor Issues Reflects Ethic of Social Responsibility” (7/25/04) and “Ikea Employees Take Pride in Level of Responsibility Company Affords Them” (7/27/04). The Register’s Ikea reporter was even sent to Sweden to visit the company’s headquarters – on Ikea’s dime, according to Columbia Journalism Review (11/12/04), a little detail the Register failed to disclose.

The back-scratching reached its apex the day of the grand opening, when the Register (7/28/04) heralded the arrival of Ikea and fellow super-store Wal-Mart and remarked upon Ikea’s “astonishingly low prices – a coffee table for \$99, a flowing watering can for \$1.99, a woven rocking chair, \$59.” Sound like an ad? It was the Register’s lead editorial.

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● While Register readers could have mistaken the paper's news for advertising, Boston Herald readers on January 7 could easily have mistaken the paper's front-page ad for news. When discount airline JetBlue launched several new flight services out of Boston's Logan Airport, Bostonians who picked up a free promotional Herald that day found that every item on the front page was devoted exclusively to the airline, including the lead headline, "JetBlue Arrives, Promises a Free TV to All Who Fly," and teasers like "Flight Attendant Gives Passenger Entire Can of Soda." After the front page, the paper resumed its actual news content – but nowhere did the Herald indicate that its front page was in fact a paid advertisement, and the 20,000 recipients of the promo paper missed out on the actual front-page news of the day (BostonPhoenix.com, 1/7/04).

When asked about the stunt, a Herald spokesperson said the paper had produced the "mock" front page "to commemorate JetBlue's launch into the Boston market" (WBUR.org, 1/9/04). She did acknowledge that "We probably should have said something . . . that indicated it wasn't our real front page," but wouldn't rule out future front-page promos.

● When Kirksville, Missouri's KTVO-TV ran a news report that quoted a company that didn't advertise on the station rather than a competitor that did, the angry advertiser pulled its ads from the station. KTVO vice president and general manager Crystal Amini-Rad quickly apologized to the sales staff in a memo that also

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required news reporters to “have access to an active advertiser list . . . of sources which you can tap into” for expert opinion and industry comment – and told reporters that they “should always go” to station advertisers first on any story (Columbia Journalism Review, 9/10/04).

- When Silver City, New Mexico’s KNFT brought on progressive host Kyle Johnson as an alternative to the seven hours of Rush Limbaugh, Michael Savage and Bill O’Reilly the station aired every weekday, KNFT’s advertisers boycotted the show. The station made Johnson raise the cash to pay for his airtime, and his listeners anted up. But the advertisers threatened to boycott the entire station if Johnson stayed on; faced with the prospect of a nearly \$10,000-a-month loss, the station manager reluctantly gave the progressive host the boot (Silver City Sun-News, 7/21/04).

Powerful Players & PR

It’s not just advertisers who have the clout to bend the rules of journalism. People in powerful positions have long pulled strings to influence news coverage, with journalists sometimes acting as witting accomplices.

- When a journalist at Bloomberg News filed a report about a civil suit against Deutsche Bank (12/5/04), it didn’t seem like a particularly remarkable story; a former female employee was accusing the company of firing her for complaining about, among other things, sexual harassment by Damian Kissane, a former Deutsche Bank

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exec. But to the surprise of the newsroom staff, editor-in-chief Matthew Winkler had it purged from the Bloomberg website and replaced six days later with a bowdlerized version that deleted the names of all parties involved. Shortly afterwards, he issued a memo to the staff, admonishing that Bloomberg News “must never be a mouthpiece for litigants who want to publish court filings to embarrass or gain an advantage over their opponents.”

Winkler claimed the story “lacked context” and a sense of “why do we care about this” (Washington Post, 1/5/05). The New York Post (12/24/04) reported that Kissane, now Chief Operating Officer of the financial markets branch of the Royal Bank of Scotland, was said to have complained to Winkler. Bloomberg insiders cited by the New York Post suggested that Winkler rewrote the story in response to Kissane’s complaint – perhaps unsurprisingly, since Bloomberg’s main business is selling market information to the financial industry.

- When St. Paul, Minnesota’s KSTP-TV needed a new lead anchor, it picked someone with years of experience – in PR. Cyndy Brucato had started at KSTP in the early ’80s, but then moved on to communications work for Republican politicians, and for the previous eight years ran a PR firm, Halliday & Brucato, with her husband. There her clients ranged from the Minnesota House Republican Caucus to big pharmaceutical and tobacco companies. Brucato also held a state government position on the Minnesota Board on Judicial Standards, which she didn’t give up when she

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started her journalism job.

Brucato argued that she had quit seeing clients at the firm and said she would disclose any conflicts of interest as they arose. Of course, ceasing to see clients hardly removes the financial interest involved; the firm is still run by her husband, and she noted that it “is something I have some equity in” (City Pages, 8/4/04).

● Courts have consistently ruled that university administrations have to keep their noses out of college papers’ business, but that didn’t deter Arizona State University president Michael Crow. When ASU’s State Press (10/7/04) ran a picture of a female breast with a pierced nipple on the cover of its weekly magazine supplement, Ira Fulton, who had given ASU \$58 million in the previous year and a half, called Crow’s office to complain. Crow immediately dispatched the student affairs president to warn the paper that “funding will be suspended ASAP if not corrected.”

Virgil Renzulli, ASU’s vice president for public affairs, claimed the real issue was that the State Press didn’t have a clearly defined content policy; to the students’ response that they follow the Society for Professional Journalists’ code of ethics, he replied, “We think that there may be guidelines more appropriate for student journalists than the ones for other news organizations” (AP, 11/26/04).

Though the administration insisted Fulton’s complaint had nothing to do with the crackdown, Crow wrote him an October 16 letter assuring him that “the Office of Student Affairs will be monitoring the newspaper’s forthcoming editorial decisions very close-

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ly and working with its management to ensure that the University's standards are clearly understood. I appreciate your direct engagement on this matter" (Phoenix New Times, 11/18/04).

As Crow told the Arizona Republic (11/20/04), "I don't think we want [the State Press] off campus. I think as an investor in the business, we want some say in how it's run." Now there's an education in how the media really works.

The Boss's Business

When conservatives complained that CBS was promoting Bush critic Richard Clarke on 60 Minutes without disclosing that his book *Against All Enemies* was published by Free Press, another Viacom subsidiary, CBS responded (Hollywood Reporter, 3/23/04) by saying that the show "has interviewed authors from virtually all the book publishing companies over its 36 seasons and is beholden to none of them. Publishers seek out 60 Minutes because it is television's No. 1 newsmagazine." But the question is not whether authors wouldn't want to get on 60 Minutes if they didn't work for the same company; the question is, are we really supposed to believe they don't get preferential consideration when they do?

As a report in the American Journalism Review noted (11/12/04), comments filed with the FCC regarding its ownership regulations provided some concrete examples that such mutual back-scratching does go on. AJR quoted a newspaper reporter whose bosses also owned a TV station:

"When the Nielsen TV ratings come out, I know I am expected

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to write a big story if the co-owned station's ratings are good and to bury the story if the co-owned station's ratings are down. Or another example. A few years ago, I ran a survey asking readers what they thought of local television news programs. My general manager told me the next time I do something that might affect our sister station, I better check with him first. I got the message. I haven't done a similar project since then."

● The violation of the boundary between news and entertainment is perhaps nowhere as flagrant as on network "newsmagazine" shows. As a May 14 Los Angeles Times story explained, the NBC News program Dateline found plenty of news value in the entertainment offerings of NBC. "Despite criticism that NBC's news programs have been turned into brazen marketing tools for several of the network's prime-time series finales," the Times reported, "the management of the combined company seems delighted with the promotional firepower of its enterprise." The Times cited, among other things, the two-hour Dateline (5/5/04) devoted to the final episode of the sitcom Friends, as well as generous coverage of the NBC sitcom Frasier and the Donald Trump "reality" show The Apprentice.

Thanks to NBC's recent acquisition of Universal, network news president Neal Shapiro looks forward to NBC news programs getting first crack at interviewing movie stars affiliated with Universal films. He dismissed criticisms of this blurring of the lines between news and entertainment as "asinine" (L.A. Times, 5/14/04).

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NBC Today anchor Katie Couric, interviewing Trump, remarked that he “seems to be the fifth member of the show these days . . . I have confidence you’re going to be here a lot in the fall.” To which Trump replied, “Jeff Zucker will not allow it to be any other way, will he?” Zucker is, as *Newsday*’s Verne Gay noted (4/21/04), “president of NBC’s Entertainment, News and Cable Group and a leading proponent of a practice known in TV parlance as ‘cross-promotion.’”

● During the May “sweeps” period (when advertising rates are set based on audience share), *TV Guide* (6/11/04) counted over 117 minutes of NBC promotions on the Today show. CBS’s Early Show, which runs an hour less than Today, finished second with just over 107 minutes. ABC’s Good Morning America came in last with just under 36 minutes of self-promotion. Former morning show producer Steve Friedman told the magazine that “it’s inevitable that a morning show or a magazine show will do these segments,” adding: “You’d be a fool not to do it. It’s a business.”

● Washington Post TV reporter Lisa de Moraes (8/6/04) catalogued the self-promotion she found in just that day’s listings. ABC’s 20/20 profiled reality TV star Victoria Gotti, whose Growing Up Gotti program just happened to be airing on the A&E cable channel – owned by ABC parent Disney. Over at CBS, the 48 Hours newsmagazine profiled Yoanna House, who lost 60 pounds to try out for America’s Next Top Model, a reality show airing on

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the UPN network – which, like CBS, is owned by Viacom. De Moraes pointedly remarked: “Remember how the broadcast networks explained that they would cover only three hours of each of the four-day Democratic and Republican conventions because they are nothing more than infomercials out of which no real news comes?”

- The network that pays for the rights to broadcast the Olympic Games always happens to find the Olympics far more newsworthy than its network competitors. In 2004, according to the Tyndall Report’s tally of network newscast coverage (8/28/04), NBC Nightly News devoted 106 minutes of news time to the Athens events; by comparison, ABC dedicated 34 minutes of news time, and CBS only 15. NBC executive producer Tom Touchet, who works on the Today show, felt no conflict, telling the Atlanta Journal-Constitution (8/14/04) that “his bosses haven’t asked him to do anything he wasn’t comfortable with.”

- On July 9, ABC’s 20/20 presented a segment on the legend of King Arthur. While that might be an odd topic for a newsmagazine show, even more unusual was one of the guest “experts” chosen to share his views on the subject: Hollywood bigwig Jerry Bruckheimer, whose “expertise” consisted in being the producer of the new Disney film King Arthur. As the Christian Science Monitor (8/27/04) noted, “If the weakness of Bruckheimer’s grasp of Arthurian lore was obvious, the connection between his movie

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and ABC television wasn't. Only at the end of the segment did the reporter mention that Disney owns ABC.”

As the Monitor explained, Disney/ABC felt no need to even conjure up a good explanation for the decision: “The movie producer was included in the show for business reasons, not because he was the most knowledgeable source, acknowledges David Westin, president of ABC News. ‘It made good sense for us, frankly,’ he says, ‘to take advantage of all the marketing and publicity for the movie.’”

Government and Other "Official" Pressure

The relationship between the press and government should, in theory, be a somewhat confrontational one. When stories surface that local governments are refusing to speak to certain reporters or media outlets, one can only hope that in some way this means the media in question are doing their job, and politicians are angry about it.

Government officials also know that applying a little pressure to the media can go a long way. It's worth remembering that these same media companies are often engaged in high-stakes lobbying, trying to extract favors from federal or state regulators they're also obligated to cover – so even if they don't cave in to pressure, they're not often eager to embarrass the officials who applied it.

Occasionally, though, some examples of government pressure attempts are made public. When celebrity reporter Kitty Kelley was promoting her critical book about the Bush family, a White

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House official called NBC News president Neal Shapiro to discourage the network from doing interviews with her (New York Times, 9/9/04).

Even some of the most celebrated journalism is affected by government pressure: CBS's April 28 investigation of the abuse and torture at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, for example, was held for two weeks at the request of the Pentagon.

It's not just that press-state relations are often uncontentious; sometimes they're downright cozy. When California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger traveled to New York for the Republican National Convention, the tab wasn't picked up by the GOP, or even the state he serves; instead, a handful of the largest media companies in the country – including Fox, NBC Universal, Time Warner, Disney and Viacom – paid the bill (New York Times, 8/26/04).

● At the Austin American-Statesman, editorial page editor Arnold Garcia Jr. got what other reporters might have considered a scoop: Local business Temple-Inland Inc. was planning a major – and potentially controversial – expansion of its corporate headquarters. But instead of reporting the news, he suppressed it.

Garcia got the tip while playing golf with Austin Mayor Will Wynn. Later, when Garcia e-mailed Wynn for more information, the mayor told the editor that he'd rather the information not appear in print, since he wanted time to line up political support for the company's decision, which was likely to encounter stiff environmental opposition.

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News of the company's plans leaked out two months after Garcia first learned of them, thanks to an investigation by a local environmental group. Their digging yielded more bad news; as Garcia explained in a column to the paper's readers (1/29/04): "Worse, in an incredible lapse of judgment, I offered to send a draft [to Wynn] of whatever editorial resulted."

- New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson no doubt appreciated the effusive speech that welcomed him to the Border Governors Conference. Richardson, attendees learned, "has done more for New Mexico in two legislative sessions than any previous governor accomplished in decades." No small praise, especially considering the source: Monica Armenta, an anchor at New Mexico TV station KOB. To make matters worse, Armenta didn't even write the words herself – that was left to the governor's staff. Armenta told the American Journalism Review (10/ 11/04) that she'd learned her lesson, though she added, "I've done hundreds of these over the years, and so have many other people in this market."

- Upsetting the political applecart is part of a journalist's job – but it might cost them that job.

Rep. Nick Smith's (R.- Mich.) intention to vote against George W. Bush's 2003 Medicare drug plan didn't sit well with powerful GOP lawmakers, who Smith said made him an offer: If he changed his vote, his son Brad, who wanted to run for his father's congressional seat, would receive \$100,000 in campaign support. Smith not

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only stuck to his “no” vote, he told people about the alleged bribe, with the story eventually making its way into the news, including a Robert Novak syndicated column (11/27/03).

Soon afterward, Smith tried to revise his tale, issuing a press release (12/4/03) that denied the \$100,000 offer. But reporter Kevin Vandebroek of radio station WKZO (12/1/03) came forward with evidence that made Smith’s new denial hard to swallow: a tape of an interview where Smith discussed the “\$100,000-plus” offered to his son’s campaign.

Vandebroek’s scoop, however, didn’t please everyone at his station; according to Slate (3/24/04), while some station officials were proud of his work, “there were others that might have been uncomfortable that it was focusing on a member of the Republican Party.” A few weeks later, Vandebroek reported that George W. Bush made several dubious claims in an interview with NBC, which prompted a phone call to the station from local Republican officials. Vandebroek told Slate that after that incident, “I got called in and told to stay away from politics.” The station eventually dismissed Vandebroek for violating company e-mail policy following an exchange with a far-right author who refused to appear on the station.

As Slate’s Timothy Noah put it, “Vandebroek’s prominence in reporting a major political story ought to make WKZO proud. Instead, it apparently made the Kalamazoo radio station nervous.”

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SIDEBAR 1:

Op-Ed's Odd Ethics

● The St. Louis Post-Dispatch had some regrets after running an op-ed (5/18/04) by syndicated columnist James Glassman, in which Glassman slammed the new documentary *Super Size Me*, which takes a critical look at McDonald's. The paper identified Glassman, who called the film an "outrageously dishonest and dangerous piece of self-promotion," as a fellow at the conservative American Enterprise Institute and as the host of a website called TechCentralStation.com. But as a May 20 editor's note acknowledged, had the Post-Dispatch actually looked at TechCentralStation.com, it would have discovered that McDonald's is prominently listed as a sponsor, and perhaps also noticed "the lavish spinoff website that TechCentralStation.com has devoted solely to discrediting *Super Size Me*." Readers, the paper noted, likely would have appreciated knowing of this affiliation.

Less than a month later, Glassman struck again: In a June 6 Los Angeles Times op-ed co-authored by a TCS colleague, he attacked "left-wing activists" for trying to force Abbott Laboratories to give up its patent on Norvir, an important AIDS drug, after the company jacked the drug's price up by 400 percent. But once again, left unmentioned was the connection between TCS and the company it was defending: Abbott is a member of PhRMA, the pharmaceutical trade association, which, like McDonald's, is a TCS funder (Center for American Progress, 6/10/04).

Glassman's particularly popular in the Washington Times:

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Three times in as many months, the paper published op-eds by Glassman that pushed views and policies that would directly favor TCS sponsors. Glassman praised Bush policies that have been a financial boon to tech companies like TCS backers Intel, Microsoft and Qualcomm (10/27/04); blasted the use of generic anti-AIDS drugs in developing countries, another threat to PhRMA (11/17/04); and trashed global warming science and the Kyoto Protocol (12/16/04), which are both anathema to TCS sponsor ExxonMobil. Not once was his TCS affiliation or relationship to the sponsors disclosed.

- When the Austin Chronicle's William M. Adler read a pro-nuclear-industry op-ed in the Austin American-Statesman by University of Texas professor Sheldon Landsberger (3/4/04), he thought it sounded strangely familiar. After some enterprising digging, Adler confirmed his hunch: Landsberger's piece contained phrases nearly identical to those in an op-ed by another academic, both of whom had agreed to sign their names to pro-industry columns written entirely by nuclear industry propagandists.

Landsberger's column argued that the public was being burned by the federal government because the feds were failing to provide sufficient funds for developing the Yucca Mountain nuclear waste dump in Nevada. In the op-ed, the nuclear industry lobbyist who actually wrote the column remarked: "This is stealing money from taxpayers who were required to support the waste management project."

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According to the Chronicle (4/16/04), Landsberger, a nuclear engineering professor, admits that he's been allowing his name and university position to be used like this by the nuclear industry two or three times a year for the past four or five years. And as Adler documents, the industry has been placing ghost-written columns for decades under various names.

The Statesman ran a letter of apology from Landsberger in its letters to the editor section on April 14. While that's a welcome correction, it's hardly a solution to the problem. As Bill Perkins, a founding partner of the PR firm responsible for Landsberger's op-eds, said (Washington Post, 4/25/04): "I doubt that there is a public affairs campaign by any advocacy group in the country that doesn't have some version of this. . . . This is fairly conventional."
– J.H.

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SIDEBAR 2

PBS: Bowing Under Pressure

Public broadcasters have a more explicit reliance on government than commercial broadcasters: They survive in part on federal and state funding. With that relationship comes the danger that public broadcasters, who have an explicit obligation to present divergent and underrepresented views, will bow to political pressure.

After South Carolina Educational Television aired a documentary on gays in the South, a state lawmaker threatened to cut the agency's funding. Though the program in question was not funded by SCETV, state Rep. John Graham Altman was incensed that the "militant homosexual agenda" found a home on public TV (Associated Press, 11/28/04). AP noted that the agency's funding had already declined as of late – from \$20.3 million to \$12.7 million in the past four years. No action has been taken as of early 2005.

But consider the rightward drift of PBS, and you see how political pressure works. In 2004, PBS scaled back *Now With Bill Moyers* from one hour to 30 minutes – even as Moyers retired and was replaced by a less political host – and added two shows from a distinctly conservative perspective: *Tucker Carlson Unfiltered* and the *Wall Street Journal Editorial Report*.

According to reports in the public broadcasting newspaper *Current* (1/19/04, 6/7/04) and the *New Yorker* (6/7/04), conservative lawmakers' complaints about the alleged liberal bias of *Now* led PBS officials to strive to "balance" their lineup. At the center of this controversy is the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB),

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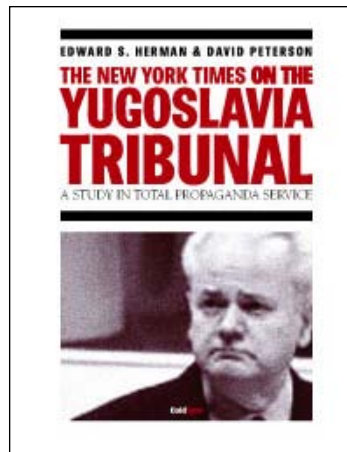
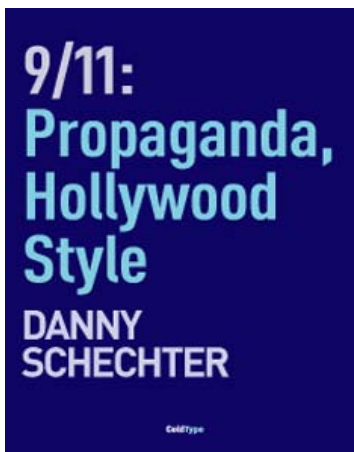
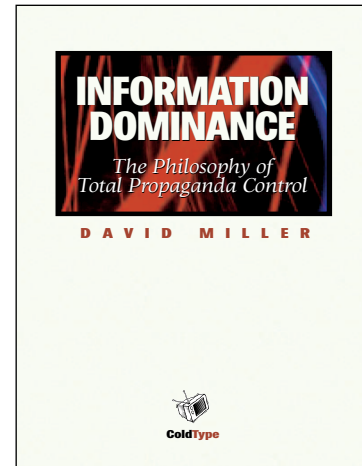
the organization through which federal funding is distributed to public broadcasting.

During confirmation hearings for CPB appointee Cheryl Halpern, Sen. Trent Lott (R.-Miss.) criticized a commentary by Moyers as “the most blatantly partisan, irresponsible thing I’ve ever heard in my life,” adding that “the CPB has not seemed to be willing to deal with Bill Moyers and that type of programming.” Halpern responded: “The fact of the matter is, I agree,” though she said at the time there was little the CPB could do about it.

But there was something the CPB could do. According to Ken Auletta’s investigation in the *New Yorker*, PBS president Pat Mitchell was meeting with Lynne Cheney and conservative television producer Michael Pack to discuss a possible series about Cheney’s children’s books. And after former House Speaker Newt Gingrich told Mitchell that there weren’t enough conservatives on PBS, the *New Yorker* reported that Mitchell “proposed to Gingrich that he co-host a PBS town-hall program,” an idea that was frustrated by Gingrich’s contract with Fox News Channel.

When the committee reconvened in late July, Lott “noted progress” on the subject of liberal bias (Public Broadcasting Report, 7/23/04). That senators like Lott hold public broadcasting’s purse strings tells you all you need to know about PBS’s public affairs programming. – P.H.

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