

Fighting the media war in 2004

By Danny Schechter

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In 2003, media practices that once were casual complaints became issues around which millions were organizing. The outcry against the pathetic cheerleading that called itself TV coverage of the war in Iraq, and the battle to stop new FCC rules demonstrated that there is a large constituency for media activism and organization.

Media activists led the fight. More than 2,000 converged in November on Madison, Wisconsin to signal a commitment to make media reform a central concern. It was an impressive, energetic and strong statement. There were members of Congress, top journalists like Bill Moyers, and legends like Studs Terkel. Comedian Al Franken was there along with other best-selling authors, pop stars and a who's who among media reformers.

The analysis was as powerful as the passion. But the follow up has yet to result in a new organization or coalition. And follow up is key for 2004. The conference was not important as an event in itself – it was important as a staging ground for a new offensive on media issues.

Political maneuvers and compromises in Congress blocked the total rebuke to the FCC in 2003 that many hoped for. The tricks politicians play seem to have taken the wind out of a well orchestrated citizens campaign. It was a set back but not a total defeat because the campaign showed that media have become a mainstream issue and will not go away.

What the impressive mobilization of public sentiment should signal to other activists – who have tended to denigrate media activism as somehow secondary to the “real problems” – is that this is one of the few issues with national traction, and an ability to galvanize support across the spectrum.

The FCC battle and the public rejection of proposed deregulation was the first issue that the Bush administration threatened to veto. It was the first that brought Democrats and some Republicans together. It signaled that media concerns are not marginal or to be marginalized.

What's next? One email I received recently asked, “What do we do when our TV and newspapers tell us lies but insist we should regard this information as truth? What do we

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do when the vast majority of people in our society accepts these lies as truths and ridicule us when we call these statements lies?”

These are good questions but there are also some good answers. They involve hard work and real action, day-to-day work in the trenches – not just sending checks to candidates in hopes that dumping Bush will be a panacea to our ills. Bear in the mind that part of the mess we are in goes back to the Telecommunications “Reform” Act of 1996 backed by the Clinton administration and many liberal Democrats. The bill was supposed to foster competition. It led instead to a massive wave of media concentration.

Notice how few candidates even focus on media concentration or slanted coverage. All fear that they will lose their fifteen seconds of fame if they piss off thin-skinned media moguls.

If you recognize, as many in the global justice movements do, that real power is exercised today not by governments but by private interests, then a focus on corporate interests makes sense. If that is the case, the corporate media deserve more attention.

Media institutions that report on the corporate irresponsibility of others, like the endless stream of indicted Wall Street operators, need to turn the cameras on themselves. How socially responsible and accountable are they? How transparent? Had activists been paying attention, there would have been a protest against revelations in 2000 by the Alliance for Better Campaigns that showed how many local TV stations violated federal laws by overcharging candidates while reducing their electoral coverage.

What this points to is the need for activists themselves to become better informed about the way Big Media work – and the way the government colludes with it. That’s where websites like mediachannel.org and mediareform.net and the research of groups like FAIR and Media Tenor come in.

Are you paying attention to the latest research and analysis of media manipulation? Are you aware of how the media drive politics and why we can now speak of America as a “mediaocracy” in which media outlets and not people decide what or who counts?

At year’s end, Rupert Murdoch was given a thank-you present for services rendered by the FCC in the form of a go-ahead to take over DirecTV, the largest satellite TV service in the United States. (It was owned by Hughes Electronics Corp. which was then bought by General Motors.)

As Space News explains, “The deal gives News Corp. a television-distribution platform in the United States, where it already operates TV stations, the Fox television network and several pay-TV channels.” This is also part of a global strategy, as the trade newspaper explains: “In addition to DirecTV, which claimed 11.85 million subscribers as of the end of September, Hughes operates a satellite hardware and networking company, Hughes

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Network Systems of Germantown, Md., and controls DirecTV Latin America, a satellite TV provider in Central and South America. Hughes also owns 81 percent of Wilton, Conn.-based satellite operator PanAmSat Corp.”

Could this FCC decision have anything to do with comments made by FCC Chairman Michael Powell (son of the Secretary of State and originally a Clinton administration appointee, by the way) that one reason we need big media is that “only big media can cover the war the way this one has been covered”?

Did you know that a dictionary website that tracks words found that “embedding” was the most used new word of 2003? During the invasion phase of the Iraq war, jingoism fused with journalism while show biz morphed into what TIME magazine called “militainment.”

Can it get any worse? You bet. It took a week for us to learn, for example, that the capture of Saddam was not as reported a U.S. military intelligence coup, but rather the work of Kurdish groups bent on avenging the rape of a woman, not the country. Lesson: You can't trust mainstream news.

We can expect more disinformation and misinformation next year with renewed efforts by the U.S. government to leapfrog over any semblance of critical media with news feeds that bypass the news networks and are fed directly to local stations. Media control will intensify as perceived “bad news” threatens to disturb the domestic tranquility that the administration is hell-bent on preserving.

This is part of the privatization of and a synergization with a strategy adapted by the U.S. military called “information dominance.” David Miller, editor of an important new book called “Tell Me Lies” (Pluto) explains: “As Col Kenneth Allard has written, the 2003 attack on Iraq ‘will be remembered as a conflict in which information fully took its place as a weapon of war’ the interoperability of the various types of ‘weaponized information’ has far reaching, if little noticed, implications for the integration of propaganda and media institutions into the war machine. The experience of Iraq in 2003 shows how the planned integration of the media into instruments of war fighting is developing. It also shows the increased role for the private sector in information dominance, a role which reflects wider changes in the armed services in the US and the UK.”

It is important that independent media outlets educate their audiences about this type of insidious strategic planning. As important as exposing it is resisting it. Happily, a cultural resistance is emerging with theater groups lampooning the news. The New York Times reports on a new play in New Haven which ridicules coverage of a war that “is being fought somewhere against an unknown enemy because the Pentagon has decided that to reveal whom and where American forces are fighting would be a security risk.”

The play, “A New War” by Gip Hoppe, which “satirizes a television broadcast from a

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newsroom at a network very similar to CNN,” is a ridiculing send-up of the Bush administration and a kowtowing news media. It owes a great deal to the “Weekend Update” feature on “Saturday Night Live.”

There is even a version of “Crossfire,” here called “Crosshairs,” John Stewart’s Comedy Channel news show and many articles in “The Onion” that testify to how popular and commercially successful this type of assault on mainstream media has become.

We are all living in the crosshairs of powerful media institutions. Their fire is “incoming,” right into our living rooms, and then into our brains. We need more than self-defense. We need collective action to challenge mainstream media assumptions and push back. We need to support independent media, with our eyeballs, dollars and our marketing know how. We need to encourage media literacy education in our schools. We need to challenge candidates to speak out on these issues, and media outlets to cover them.

The short truism is that we can all do more than we are doing to ensure that next year is not just happy but happier than 2003.

Mediachannel.org is launching a major new initiative called “Media for Democracy 2004” to monitor and challenge political coverage next year – and to mobilize voters around a campaign for better media practices. Timothy Karr, MediaChannel.org’s executive director, is leading this effort and can be reached at tim@mediachannel.org if you want to help and have time, resources or skills to contribute. ●

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