

Martin Luther King Jr. Day 2003

"They rely mostly on large sales, and for large sales on sensational news. Now nothing does so much to keep sensational news coming in over the considerable period of time as war...Next to war they welcome the Promise of war."---E.L. Godkin

News analysis
By Jake Asbin

Totalitarian News Merchants of Fiction

The disturbing and intentionally inconspicuous war currently being waged by the powerful -- and ever-consolidating -- corporate media cartels for control of our nation's news sources is probably the most dangerous and under-reported story over the last year. After the obvious collaboration from many of them in their coverage of, what some believe, was a fraudulent presidential election. These media moguls, in the two years since, have further attempted to subvert our Constitutional right to the information which is the foundation of a democratic society with their subtle censorship.

It's more than suspicious that the media can somehow justify their rapidly-rising fees, while at the same time reducing news coverage, much of which is now deferred to a website where, in most cases, viewers must either pay a subscriber fee or a high-downloading cost to use. CBS, NBC and ABC does this every night, and National Public Radio maintains this same policy of reporting only half the story much of the time. Remember every "hit" on their website secures even more revenue for some over-paid CEO .

The cost per month most households would incur for monthly basic cable and broadband cable/internet service, is about \$120 per month. That's not even close to buying one week's groceries for most families. Including my own family. Is this really a worthwhile price to pay for possibly 80-percent misinformation ?

The autocratic media industry commits this act of public betrayal at an ever-increasing rate. For example, how many times in one evening news broadcast will the public hear the following statement: "For full coverage of this story and others log onto our web site" at you/know/the/rest/of/the/BS. com. How many times can you notice news coverage, on channels from the five dominant television news stations, promote this type of half -coverage reporting?

Doesn't anyone notice how little significant news and relevant information the public is actually given? As to the stories where the citizenry becomes better informed and attentive to significant concerns, the corporate media heavily censors or refers us to a web site for the complete story. Do they feel we can't comprehend the unofficial truth? These web sites become really nothing more than additional avenues of advertising space for the corporations and their media personalities, also known as, journalists and reporters.

Each of the three evening broadcast news anchors (with their smug pretense to "objectivity") have written books in the past year, and the stations that bestow them the privilege to report and shape American perception (in some cases Middle Eastern policy), have become nothing more than platforms for increased book sales. When did infatuation with celebrity status replace honest and truly objective reporting from reporters?

Over the last year and a half, *The New York Times*' coverage has become, in my view, especially sanitized and somewhat unreliable and must not be confused with independent reporting. I have often noticed that some news stories seemingly read like an "advertorials."

A perfect example of unreliability in reporting from *The Times* is the October 27, 2002 edition and its erroneous coverage of the anti-war protests on October 26 in our nation's capital. In this edition *The Times* reporter gave the reader the impression she covered the anti-war protest in Washington DC, in person based on how the byline and article read. But, in fact, she never left her desk in New York. The article quoted a student and professor as sources of what was transpiring at the protest. Though the truth was *The Times* reporter contacted the student via cellphone and contacted the professor 3-days earlier. The reporter also gave inaccurate numbers as to how many people were actually at the protests. The reporter originally stated that thousands were at the protests, when in fact the real number was over 100,000 people. A full three days later after much ridicule and thousands of complaints, *The Times* finally got the numbers and the story correct.

Further examples of shoddy reporting by *The Times* are the following examples:

The recent error *The Times*' *Week in Review* (12/29/02, pg. 7) section made identifying a photograph, who their caption stated was, of the late Joe Strummer of The Clash. The photograph was, in fact, of Clash band mate Mick Jones. It took *The Times* a full week to issue a small correction of this unacceptable mistake.

Another example of inaccurate or biased reporting is the following story. John Burns, a senior foreign correspondent for *The Times*, while covering the recent Voices in the Wilderness' (led by Kathy Kelly co-founder of the Chicago-based nonviolent activists group who is campaigning to end U.N. sanctions imposed on Iraq) courageous campaign against U.N. sanctions on Iraq and their anti-war protest in Baghdad, wrote in the 10/27/02 edition on page 8: "Those sanctions, greatly eased, remain in place over a decade later as part of the American-led effort to force Iraq to meet the terms of United Nations resolutions" regarding Iraq's disarmament.

The truth is the U.N. sanctions have not been eased but rather have been strengthened even further over the last few years. The results of which have increased infant mortality, for Iraqi children under the age of five, by a whopping 160-percent. This increase is directly related to the sanctions not permitting water purifying equipment into Iraq causing a severe shortage of potable water. The current White House administration has also made it harder for Iraq to receive much-needed cancer medicines as well as basic hospital supplies.

No correction was ever issued for this blatant misrepresentation of the actual facts pertaining to the "easing" of U.N. sanctions by *The Times*. Mr. Burns has also refused my repeated attempts for clarification on his comments.

Adding insult to injury: Early last year a New York State Court held *The New York Times* liable and directed them to comply with a court decision which directed the paper to retroactively pay freelance writers for articles they used in the subscription-only, on-line edition. Works *The Times* chose not to pay for until the court's final determination. I was one of these unpaid writers. And since this settlement I have never submitted any of my articles to them again.

Recently, I conducted my own independent little survey of news coverage from our so-called source of "All The News That's Fit to Print"--*The New York Times*. Which, since 9/11, now publishes, advertises and reviews its own books. I put *The Times* (with a newsstand

cost of approximately \$2,028 per year and is found in every international airport and U.S. library) through an unbiased test of accuracy and objectivity in its news coverage. (There is no point in my buying *The Boston Globe* for alternative coverage because it is owned by *The Times* anyway. So I just went to the source. i.e., *The New York Times*, which at one time was called our “newspaper of record.”)

The Times full-page of news measures: thirteen & five-eighths inches wide by twenty-two inches deep. I randomly applied this independent survey to the Tuesday, November 26, 2002 issue as the test subject. The headline occupies page 1 and contains seven news stories and thankfully no advertising. Page A2 presents the summary of the current day's stories and the previous day's numerous corrections. No news stories appear on this page but advertisements do.

Page A3 and A4 have been dominated by ten advertisements that dwarf the two international news stories that appear over the two pages. Page A5 has only one news story that measures four & one-quarter by six & seven -eighths inches, and eight same-sized advertisements pushing more consumption, as if unnecessary consuming would cure our great nation's ills, fears, and lack of livable-wage paying employment.

Page A6 consists of three news stories that are overshadowed by a huge, strategically placed ad. Page 7 is a full-page ad for a corporate-owned chain of department stores. Page A8 contains, probably the most informative article, the “World Briefing” column which measures six & three-eighths by ten & one-eighth inches. The rest of the page is, you guessed it, advertising.

Page A9 is another, three-color, full-page ad promoting high-priced clothing. Finally page A10 is another full-page ad for a chain of prominent and upscale hotels connected at one time to a convicted felon. So where is “All the news that's fit to print” in the first ten pages?

My final survey (extending over just the first ten pages) totals: thirty-five percent (14) important, but somewhat incomplete, news stories versus sixty percent (30) ads advocating over indulgence and more debt to the reader.

Serious ramifications to a democratic society arise from untrustworthy reporting. A serious lack of investigative news coverage, equal print and air time from a dissenting point of view, and integrity from the press and media are dangerous threats to the public's right to know and of a free and open press. How many articles quote “government or administration officials” as sources? Isn't this a rudimentary form of propaganda? Especially when the press becomes nothing more than an echo-chamber of government policy instead of useful news.

First, this is a subtle form of censorship when these government officials' names are not provided, *Democracy Now* host Amy Goodman recently explained to me.

Second, the public must finally understand that We The People are the subjects of deceptive campaigns intended to keep us distracted, ignorant and prejudiced. Especially when it comes to this administration's current foreign and nuclear weapon policies, Bush's continuing assault on the environment, and the failure, of the media, to accurately cover or report on the escalating anti-war movement in almost every city of our nation.

To what extent does media lust for more advertising revenue subvert and undermine news reporting? How many more investigative journalists and local news department editors will newspaper brass eliminate in order to keep profits at record highs? In Springfield, Mass., near where I live and write, the *Union-News & Sunday Republican*

newspaper reduced news room staffing by 20-percent so it could purchase new high-tech German presses. Their recent poor and somewhat incomplete news coverage is clear evidence of these staffing reductions.

The corporate media would rather have us living as consumers than as concerned and informed citizens. Sadly, unlike the majority of Americans, the media fails to see the significance of advocating peace, compassion and respect for all peoples. Specifically by their repeated exclusion of these types of opinions from their pages and programs. When did dissent become disloyalty in this country?

Mainstream U.S. media love dissent. They love to report about it and to editorialize in favor of it, but only when it happens in places like China or Cuba. This gaping double standard of "unaccountability" is especially obvious, of late, in the pages of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. And when stories of American dissent are reluctantly reported, they are either buried on the back pages or the media gets the story wrong or the facts inaccurate.

Only when transparency and accountability from a White House administration and its gullible media personalities be reinstalled, can the citizenry regain the ability to intelligently formulate its opinion regarding key policy issues regarding national legislation or news--foreign and domestic. Until this administration respects ordinary Americans sufficiently to allow them to possess the facts they need to decide the fate of their country, democracy is dead, or at least on life-support.

The postal increases of 2002 have had a far greater impact on our few progressive publications like: Mother Jones, The Sun, The Nation, The Progressive Populist, The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists and In These Times--unfamiliar territory for most Americans--than on the corporation-owned and morally-bankrupt mainstream publications often referred to as the "Big 6" who were actually given reduced postal rates.

Major magazines that not long ago were on the cutting edge of investigative reporting are now nothing more than mouthpieces for conglomerate policy while they perpetuate America's lust for consumption. *Rolling Stone* is a recent example. At one time both Hunter S. Thompson and P. J. O'Rourke regularly wrote columns for *Rolling Stone*. That was when the magazine was an outspoken anti-nuke critic and reported thought-provoking, informative stories, not to mention good interviews.

So how does a news corporation that owns, has stakes in, or controls multiple sources of information, which includes book and magazine publishers, cable and network television channels, Internet-providing services, newspapers, national radio station chains, and Hollywood film studios become objective and unbiased sources of accurate information? Why is investigative journalism on the decline, while at the same time celebrity gossip is increasing daily as a substitute for real news? Why are producing and marketing documentaries at an all-time low?

Since September 11, senior White House, FBI, Pentagon, Armed Forces and National Security Agency officials met with and recruited many Hollywood and television directors and producers to reiterate this administration's rhetoric in current and upcoming projects. And Pentagon press releases have repeatedly become the feature stories from the Pentagon press corps on the evening news.

Michael K. Powell, Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and son of Secretary of State Colin Powell, over the next few months, will push to relax media ownership rules and will propose the rewriting of the FCC's historic mandate. He is set to

unleash sweeping changes regarding the media's concentration of information and the long-standing 35-percent rule--this free press-protecting rule does not allow a media conglomerate to own more than 35-percent of the news media outlets (newspapers, television, cable and radio stations) in any one city or region.

At the top of Powell's secret list is his plan to eliminate a variety of restraints, also known as protections in place for the public good, on the size of the nation's broadcast and cable television owners. The nation's largest telephone companies are also expecting to win (or is that buy?) substantial regulatory concessions this year at the expense of the public who will be paying higher rates very soon.

Chairman Powell, instead of protecting the public's interest and its rights to freedom of the press, and who has previously said "The oppressor here is regulation" is rapidly proceeding to change the FCC's charter with little or no public input or transparency. His changes would then empower corporations like the Murdoch media empire, Fox news (which, regrettably, broadcasts the untrustworthy and inaccurate reporting of Billy O'Reilly who, in fact, doesn't truly know what the Bill of Rights actually safeguards) and Disney--all big donors to president-select Bush--to consolidate their power. These upcoming revisions will make it easier for these three mammoth corporations to own or control almost all news sources in major-market cities like New York, Washington, Chicago and San Francisco.

Our nation must now ask itself the following troublesome questions:

If Americans are quickly becoming insensitive? Are we becoming less sympathetic to other cultures? and Is our great society becoming extensively corrupt and degraded?

If Americans were to follow the corporate media industry a little closer, one would see that sex scandals, celebrity exposés, gruesome murders, school shootings, gang wars, drug wars, crime, corruption and conspicuous consumption fill our airwaves and newspapers. Therefore, the answers to the above questions might only be answered by saying yes. Corporate media representatives say they need to protect their bottomline, and that these over-hyped and violent stories increase ratings. These same representatives almost always respond with their exhausted but well-rehearsed statement of, "we are just giving the public what it wants."

The following essay is adapted from the introduction the late (and beloved) Senator Paul Wellstone (1944-2002) wrote to Robert McChesney and John Nichols' 2000 book, *It's the Media Stupid!*:

"The media are not just any ordinary industry. They are the life blood of American democracy. We depend on the media for the free flow of information that enables citizens to participate in the democratic process. That's why freedom of the press is enshrined in our Constitution. No other industry enjoys that kind of protection."

"Yet, at the dawn of the 21st Century, America is experiencing a wave of media mergers that is leading to an unprecedented concentration of ownership in the hands of a few giant communications firms. This rapid concentration of control over the U.S. (and indeed global) media raises troubling questions for our system of representative democracy. But of all the industries where concentration of ownership is accelerating at such a rapid pace, it is consolidation in the media and entertainment industries that should alarm us most."

"For our democracy to function effectively, we depend on the media to do two things. We depend on newspapers, radio, television and now the Internet to provide citizens with access to a wide and diverse range of opinions, analyses and perspectives. And we depend

on the media to hold concentrated power--whether public or private power--accountable to the people. The greater the diversity of ownership and control, the better the media will be able to perform these vital functions."

The First Amendment of the Bill of Rights clearly states: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press."

The traditional journalistic precedence of supporting democracy by maintaining an educated and informed public now takes second place to profits and ratings.

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