Your Favorite Media Sources

We’d no sooner asked you to send us a brief description of your favorite alternative media outlet than a storm of e-mails (and a few actual letters) began to blow in. When the dust settled and interns Mandy Hu and Emma Pollin had tabulated the results, we had about 1,200 nominations for websites, newspapers, magazines, radio and TV shows, newsletters, zines, listservs and collectives.

Some of the sources got wind of our request and seemed to view it as a contest for the most “votes.” Bartcop, for example, urged its readers on with promises of “a weekend in a suite at The Venetian in Las Vegas if we win,” accompanied by lavish views of the hotel. (The vision of the 467 Bartcop voters crammed into the weekend suite delights.)

We’ll skip the counts, recounts and hanging chads. We merely want to know where people go to get real news and sustenance in these days of media mediocrity and misinformation. What follows is an unscientific cross-section of as many of your nominations as space allows.

ACORN
Oakland, Calif.

■ ACORN (www.acorn.org) provides a valuable update on what’s going on with economic and social justice. It also provides updates and news for people who sign up for Internet service through their ISP.

NATHAN HENDERSON-JAMES

ADDBUSTERS
Harrisonburg, Va.

■ Addbusters is by far the most unique magazine, visually and contextually stimulating.

GREGORI E. KELLERMAN

ALTERNET
Cheverly, Md.

■ I find alternet.org the most useful for thoughtful articles and discussion forums on a wide range of topics. Alternet seems dedicated to getting progressive voices heard by more than just progressives.

DAVID SWANSON

AMERICAS
St. Paul, Minn.

■ Americas.org is a wonderful grassroots site dedicated to news, analysis and campaigns on Latin America and globalization. It mixes original reporting with links to news sources all over the world. It’s really good at promoting action on urgent issues—fast track, sweatshops, WTO demonstrations, immigration reform, human rights campaigns like the jailed environmentalists in Mexico, the School of the Americas and so on.

EMILY HERRICK

BARTCOP
Wilkes-Barre, Pa.

■ When I want to get surly and kick conservative ass, I go to Bartcop.com. Its clenched-fist libertarianism gets me upset, gets me riled, makes me want to scream, makes me wonder what has gone so wrong with our government and our world. Damn it! Bartcop feels our pain.

A recovering Catholic who loves fine tequila and claims to be ADD with a double-digit IQ, Bartcop lives somewhere in Oklahoma, calls his hometown Knuckledrag, or K-drag, because he is surrounded by cave-man conservatives, to whom he has an open invitation every Thursday night to debate him in a chat room. Bartcop is a true original. He alienates many extreme liberals, and longtime fans desert him for a lack of ideological purity—he supported the current bombing, despises Ralph Nader for electing Bush, hates the NRA but owns a handgun. If The Nation is Jimmy Carter, Bartcop is Billy.

DAVID FALCHEK

BBC
Guanajuato, Mexico

■ I have a satellite dish that beams from Canada. If I want to know what’s really going on, I watch the BBC World News or the Canadian news. It’s pathetic how the American people get only what the powers that be give them.

ELANA DAWSON

BUZZFLASH
Woodland Hills, Calif.

■ BuzzFlash.com. Hands down. It has an unwaivering dedication to holding Bush and the Republicans’ feet to the fire for their general dishonesty, arrogance, lust for power and greed (and the Democrats’ too for all-round wimpiness).

RUSS LYNN

CANADIAN BROADCASTING COMPANY
Redding, Calif.

■ I vote for the Canadian Broadcasting Company (CBC). If you want a fresh, in-depth, worldwide perspective on today’s events, their Newsworld International program meets the challenge. CBC’s coverage is in stark contrast to the repetitive, boilerplate, spin-control rhetoric on CNN, Fox, ABC and NBC.

JEANNE LARSON

CLAMOR
Los Angeles

■ Clamor magazine (www.clamormagazine.org) is the best periodical to come out of the anti-authoritarian Battle of Seattle generation. From a scene nurtured by punk rock and zines, it’s literate yet accessible, questioning everything but never cynical. Clamor covers politics, from the recent rash of cop murders in Cincinnati to the Zapataistas and reports on the international anti-vulture trade rallies, as well as lifestyle variances from every gender and sexual viewpoint. Apparently produced primarily by young adults, it rarely panders to commercial generational stereotypes—no lounging, lip-ringed bohos or faux angry punk rockers. It proves that anarchism can be thoughtful, analytical and even non-dogmatic.

MICHAEL SIMMONS

COMMON DREAMS
Salt Lake City

■ I discovered Commondreams.org after September 11. I was depressed about the attacks and about the superpatriotic, jingoistic media response. I desperately needed to hear dissenting voices. Commondreams was a godsend. It combs the media for the best progressive editorials of the day. It has daily news updates from a variety of independent sources and links to some forty newspapers around the world.

THOMAS HUCKIN

THE DAILY HOWLER
Austin, Tex.

■ The Daily Howler (www.dailyhowler.com), besides its keen critical intellect, brings a sense of outrage to its evisceration of sleaze, sophistry and stupidity in media from the New York Times to Fox “News.” Its fervor is marked by an underlying devotion to democracy and by a sharp and often uproarious wit.

JOHN A. WALCHAK

DEMOCRACY NOW! IN EXILE
Vallejo, Calif.

■ I nominate Amy Goodman’s broadcasts in exile. She continued broadcasting on September 11 and after even when told to evacuate. She has shown courage and grace, and continues to provide excellent news analysis despite being under personal attack from Pacifica.

MARY MOCINE

New York City

■ Democracy Now! In Exile—I listen to it at www.democracynow.org, and it’s a lifeline. Goodman’s interview with Farid Esack was fabulous—a feminist Muslim male! Shame on Pacifica for locking her out.

MARION BANZHAF

DEMOCRATS
Bedford, Tex.

■ Democrats.com blasts sniveling Republicans and spineless Democrats alike.

NEIL SLAGLE

Hastings-on-Hudson, N.Y.

■ Democrats.com is like Radio Free Europe to those who want the real story. Its e-mails contain links to articles on everything from voter fraud in Florida to grassroots politics.

MARY JANE SHIMSKY

DESIGNER/BUILDER
Philadelphia

■ If it didn’t exist, Designer/builder would have to be invented! Recent topics: unusual housing options—like “airplane on a stick” (incredible! I want to live in one), big-box retailers and how to fight them, and preserving Old Havana. It beat the New York Times to the punch with a piece on how design and building techniques might have contributed to the collapse of the twin towers.

JAMES DICKINSON

DUBYA’S DAILY DIARY
Wantagh, N.Y.

■ MadKane.com and its Dubya’s Daily Diary (www.madkane.com/bush.html) is my favorite hub.

(Continued on Page 26)
Big Media, Bad News

As the US war on terrorism hurtles forward into a hazily defined post-Afghanistan phase, the news is not good. Although some of the press has lately made efforts to cover the turbulent world outside our borders, the attention has been too little and too late. Those charged with promoting the media’s social obligations, moreover, are openly disdainful of that mission. As Mark Crispin Miller notes in this special issue, FCC chairman Michael Powell speaks mockingly of some imaginary “angel of the public interest” while observing as his sacred duty the protection of corporate media interests—most recently, taking advantage of the nation’s distraction on September 13 to “review” (read, throw out) rules prohibiting a single company from owning a daily paper and TV station in the same market.

Encouraged by such regulatory indulgences, the media and entertainment giants profiled in our latest chart—“The Big Ten,” on page 27 and also accessible at www.thenation.com—continue their shape-shifting so as to exploit every possible opportunity for internal synergy. The latest of these contortions to make headlines are the move by Vivendi, just last year a stodgy French utilities firm, to acquire the entertainment arm of Barry Diller’s USA Networks and a stake in the satellite TV firm EchoStar. Vivendi Universal Entertainment, the new combined entity that Diller will run, is now free to devote glowing coverage on its television channels to the latest blockbuster from its own Universal Studios.

Overt instances of cross-promotion are increasingly common, but they are only part of the problem. The domination of the media by entertainment conglomerates has a corrosive impact on journalism, blurring the line between news and entertainment to near-invisibility. “Profit pressures produce a dumbing down of journalism,” writes former FCC commissioner Nicholas Johnson in our forum on the Big Ten chart. “The media choose content not to educate or inform but to pander to the consumers advertisers most desire.” As always, there are exceptions. In the music industry—as Artemis Records CEO Danny Goldberg notes in the forum—popular demand for edgy, stimulating fare exerts a positive influence on the decision-making of white, middle-aged executives. But by and large, the corporate media have failed spectacularly when it comes to nurturing a democratic and humane society. The next front is the Internet—still anarchic but open but vulnerable to moves by corporations to control its architecture as all media become interactive and the conglomerates jostle for position in cyberspace.

As Robert W. McChesney and John Nichols write, it is vital that progressives sustain independent media outlets (for a selection of readers’ favorites, see “Letters,” opposite), but it is not enough. “Our task is to return ‘informed consent’ to media policy-making,” they argue, calling for a new national media reform coalition and defining a legislative agenda for such a movement. Without it, as they say, “We will continue to see special issues of The Nation like this one lamenting our situation.” Next time, we hope to present a brighter picture.
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**Mission Unilateralism**

George W. Bush’s abrogation of the Anti–Ballistic Missile Treaty on December 13 was a reckless act taken without regard for the consequences—it has dealt a severe blow to the idea of a world order grounded in collective security. Bush justified this act of hubristic contempt for the rest of the world as a measure to protect the American “homeland,” but it actually will increase the danger of nuclear war and place this country at greater risk.

The abandonment of the ABM treaty represents a victory for Donald Rumsfeld’s Defense Department over Colin Powell’s State Department. It’s significant that the point man in the ABM negotiations was John Bolton, under secretary for arms control and international security, a Rumsfeld loyalist planted in the State Department over Powell’s objections. At Bolton’s confirmation hearing, Jesse Helms told him, “John, I want you to take that ABM treaty and dump it in the same place we dumped our ABM treaty co-signer, the Soviet Union, and that is to say, on the ash heap of history.” Mission accomplished. Bolton divides US policy-makers into two opposing camps: the “Americanists” and the “globalists,” the latter of which would entangle us in treaties. With the ABM pullout, the Bolton-engineered refusal to sign the biological warfare treaty, the opposition to the International Criminal Court and US subordination of multilateral relief and reconstruction projects in Afghanistan to pursuit of the war, the “Americanists” are now in the saddle—and with them the Rumsfeld/Paul Wolfowitz doctrine of a wider war on terrorism, which could embroil the United States in a cycle of bloody overseas interventions. Rumsfeld told NATO it should “prepare now for the next war.”

Reacting to Bush’s withdrawal, Vladimir Putin called it a “mistake” but indicated that the US-Russian relationship was strong enough to survive this setback. Yet Putin is surrounded by political elites who are deeply distrustful of Washington. They are already reminding Putin of the despised “Gorbachev-Yeltsin syndrome”—a pattern of far-reaching Russian concessions in the 1980s and 1990s that were met by broken Western promises. As Aleksei Arbatov, deputy chair of Parliament’s defense committee and a leading pro-Western politician, put it, “After the tragedy of September 11, Russia extended its hand full length to meet the US in the spirit of cooperation and even mutual alliance…. Today, the US has spat into that extended hand.”

Bush’s cavalier dumping of the treaty may make it impossible to engage Russia, China, India and Pakistan in a sustained diplomatic effort to outlaw nuclear, biological and chemical weapons. Now China may decide to upgrade and expand its nuclear force. This prospect seems not to have troubled the Bush team; nor was there any apparent concern about the impact of a Chinese buildup on India’s and Pakistan’s ominous nuclear calculations, especially with tensions between India and Pakistan at a rolling boil because of the terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament.

The Administration may be right in saying that the ABM treaty is something of an anachronism, a product of an outdated bipolar cold war system of nuclear deterrence. But the treaty symbolized US willingness to be bound by international agreements aimed at closing off one of the sources of a nuclear arms race. It
AIDS: Another World War

Whether measured by numbers killed or nations wounded, by economies upended or families crushed, the AIDS pandemic is a deadlier global threat than that posed by terrorist groups. But almost no one draws the logical conclusion: The war on AIDS is more important than the war on terrorism. Those on the frontlines of this war—people living with AIDS, medical professionals and community activists, family and friends—are fighting back with the meager resources they have. Report after report documents what needs to be done. The price tag is modest compared with the sums quickly appropriated in response to September 11. Yet only a trickle of resources is reaching the AIDS battle fronts.

Six months ago the world gathered in New York in a special session of the United Nations to adopt a global strategy to defeat AIDS, now acknowledged as the worst plague humankind has ever faced. The level of consensus offered hope that leaders might soon translate words into action. Kofi Annan won approval for a global fund with a target of $10 billion a year in additional resources. Yet on December 1, World AIDS Day, the international community and the media gave only perfunctory notice to new UN estimates for 2001: 3 million more dead, 5 million more HIV infections, 40 million people now living with HIV/AIDS—28 million of them in Africa. The Global Fund has garnered only $1.6 billion in pledges, including multiyear commitments. George W. Bush set the bar low with a US pledge of only $200 million, and other countries followed his example.

Years from now people will ask about AIDS, as with the Holocaust or the Rwandan genocide, “How could they have known—and failed to act?” The reason isn’t not knowing what to do. The main elements were clearly agreed on in New York: Prevention measures, like condoms and safe-sex education, are essential. Women, more vulnerable to infection, must have the right and power to control their sexual choices. Treatment, including access to antiretrovirals, must be available to provide hope for survival and an incentive to be tested. Health systems must be given the capacity to fight back by treating opportunistic and other diseases and by blocking HIV transmission from mothers to newborns.

What is lacking is the money to carry out these efforts, notes UN special envoy Stephen Lewis: “We have all over the [African] continent individual projects and programs that are successful, and the frustration lies in our inability to take them to scale.” Lack of dollars is “the single most inhibiting factor.”

Though AIDS activists have pointed out the connections between AIDS, poverty, African debt and the policies of international financial institutions, these realities have not penetrated US public discourse. Nor has the concept that paying for global public health is an obligation for those who have the means to pay. Most of the dying are in Africa and therefore invisible outside that continent. Even if moved by Africa’s tragedy, the average American is programmed to assume it is someone else’s responsibility.

Few slogans have been so often repeated as the need for “leadership” against AIDS. Notably, two leaders who could have taken decisive roles chose not even to attend the June UN session. Bush and South African President Thabo Mbeki. Together, they epitomize the two greatest impediments to the fight against AIDS: denial and disregard.

Mbeki represents deadly denial. South African activists have played leading roles in the struggle against AIDS. The South African government joined the struggle to force drug companies to back down on their court case putting patents before health. But Mbeki has balked at treatment for South Africans with HIV/AIDS. Instead of taking the clear connection between AIDS and poverty as a starting point for galvanizing the global campaign against both, he has veered into battle against his own medical community. Tragically, he has turned his eyes away from those dying for fear the sight might mar his vision of an African renaissance.

Bush, on the other hand, symbolizes outright disregard. Strong US leadership in funding the global war against AIDS would turn the tide, but Washington fails to appreciate the link between the spread of poverty, desperation and insecurity and the increase in such global threats as AIDS and terrorism. Bush refuses to give priority to the war on AIDS because the victims are mostly black, poor and female.

September 11, by bringing home the common vulnerability that Americans share with others on this planet, should serve as an impetus to a greater sense of solidarity. Instead, the reverse
has happened: The world war against AIDS, less visible but more urgent than the war against terrorism, has not even been joined.

Salih Booker is the executive director of Africa Action, the oldest US-based advocacy group on African affairs.

Dems Pray for DeLay

ick Armey’s announcement that he will retire from Congress at the end of 2002 and leave his position as majority leader—the number-two post in the Republican-controlled House—provides an occasion to recall that Armey demonstrated how easy it is to get away with lying in Washington. For years, Armey, whose opposition to the minimum wage is nearly a religious obsession, used to reminisce publicly about a retarded janitor named Charlie who cleaned the building where Armey worked when he chaired the economics department at North Texas State University. One day Charlie disappeared. Months later, Armey would say, he learned that Charlie had been laid off because the school could not afford to keep him after Congress passed a minimum-wage hike, and poor Charlie ended up on welfare. Here was solid proof, Armey claimed repeatedly, that the minimum wage hurts workers. But in 1995, an enterprising Washington Post reporter, David Maraniss, interviewed former Armey colleagues at the school who said there had been no such person as Charlie; the chancellor of the school explained that janitors are state employees exempt from federal minimum-wage laws. Armey, though, was unbowed and huffed that “people at the university didn’t get it.”

The departure of Armey, a rock-hard conservative, presents the House Republicans with a chance to show they’re more than a bunch of right-wing ideologues. But it seems that most of them are not uncomfortable with that image. Armey fought fiercely for every corporate tax cut imaginable. He wanted to criminalize abortion, he urged amending the Constitution to permit school prayer, he advocated phasing out Social Security and repealing the ban on assault weapons. He called Representative Barney Frank a “down-home guy,” says columnist David Broder—compared with his likely replacement, House majority whip Tom DeLay.

Democrats are drooling over the prospect that the Republicans will elevate DeLay, who as of this writing has fended off challengers for the spot. “Please, please, please,” begs one House Democrat. A retired conservative Democratic Congressman notes, “It’s hard to believe that most House Republicans think it helps them to be represented by DeLay. The way to explain this is, it’s money and influence at work. DeLay controls a lot of money for Republicans, and if you’re not with him, he’s against you.” Three years have passed since the Democrats lost their best foil—Newt Gingrich—and they’ve been hankering for a G OPer to demonize. George W. Bush, high in the polls, doesn’t offer much of a target, and House Speaker Dennis Hastert is too low-profile. For this type of personality politics to work, a party needs an over-the-top foe who can provoke a visceral reaction and whose name can be made shorthand for larger forces. (These days, conservatives/Republicans think they can score by depicting Senate majority leader Tom Daschle as a bogeyman.) DeLay, whose public manner is as sharp-edged as his conservative ideology, is not an effective pitchman to nonbelievers. His heavyhanded, extortionlike tactics—which include pressuring corporate lobbyists to donate more to Republicans in order to gain access to legislation-drafting sessions—can be useful in those instances when Democrats argue that Republicans serve the corporate class rather than working families. (Bush made this portion of the Democrats’ job easier by picking former Montana Governor Marc Racicot to replace former Virginia Governor Jim Gilmore as head of the Republican Party. Racicot is now a business lobbyist—the Recording Industry Association of America, the American Forest and Paper Association and the National Electric Reliability Coordinating Council—but too bad, Dems, he has an agreeable, media-friendly temperament.)

It’s not that Republicans are blind to DeLay’s PR liabilities. Representative Curt Weldon, a GOP hawk, says, “We need someone who can go on national TV and present a good, positive image of the Republican Party and not a mean-spirited image.” That won’t come from a man who enjoys the nickname The Hammer. (The rule in the House appears to be: Don’t try to nail The Hammer unless you can sure as hell crush him.) Democrats will be tempted to make DeLay the issue. With his above-average attachment to slippery fundraising, iron-fisted politics and contribution favoritism, he might afford them an opening here or there. But DeLay is more than a vengeful and unattractive pol. He’s been a hardworking, often successful legislator who knows how to win the close ones for his gang. With this move, the Democrats’ most fierce and effective foe will become more powerful—and a step closer to being Speaker.

Focusing on DeLay as they bid for control of the House is not a surefire strategy for Democrats. Blasting Gingrich did not gain them the majority, and there’s no precedent for winning back the House by attacking the second in command. Should DeLay succeed in climbing a rung on the leadership ladder—a development that would not dramatically alter the workings of the conservative-
The Wars on Terrorism

At the outset of the war on terrorism, President Bush announced a doctrine: Regimes that harbor terrorists will be dealt with as severely as the terrorists themselves. Three months later, the Taliban regime that then ruled Afghanistan is gone, and Washington is scanning the horizon for other regimes to attack. The government of Iraq is the one most frequently mentioned.

There was no sign back in September that Bush imagined that other countries might claim comparable rights, but that is what has happened. On December 13 terrorists attacked the Indian Parliament, killing seven. India announced its belief that extremist Islamic groups in Pakistan were responsible and that they had the backing of the Pakistani government, America’s new ally in Afghanistan. A spokesman for Pakistan further enraged Indian opinion by answering that India may have staged the attack upon itself. India’s home minister, L.K. Advani, then accused Pakistan of having “the temerity to try to wipe out the entire political leadership of India.” In holding the Pakistani government responsible for terrorism by groups in Pakistan, India consciously adopted the US doctrine to the letter. Now it is contemplating military action.

Just how deep India’s debt is to the American example is revealed by, among other things, an article by Brahma Chellaney, professor of security studies at India’s Center for Policy Research. He wants the December 13 attack to “shape India’s response to terrorism in the same unmistakable way that September 11 has defined America’s.” The solution he has in mind is the use of force and other unilateral measures. Just as the United States pulled out of the ABM treaty, Chellaney writes, so India should pull out of its Indus River Water Treaty with Pakistan. “The resultant water crisis,” he hopefully suggests, “will help foment internal disturbances and contribute to Pakistan’s self-destruction.” But shouldn’t Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal induce caution, he wonders? In phrases borrowed directly from the high texts of US nuclear theology, he answers that there is nothing to worry about, because India can answer “any level” of attack with a “higher level.”

So if, for example, Pakistan destroys ten of India’s greatest cities with nuclear weapons, India presumably can destroy twenty of Pakistan’s, and everything will be fine.

Alarmed, perhaps, by such patent lunacy—and also by the danger that America’s own coalition against terror, in which India and Pakistan have vied for leading roles, will be busted up—the White House, through its spokesman Ari Fleischer, counsels “restraint.” India is unimpressed. Counsel of restraint from a nation that has just overthrown the government of one country and now has five or six more in its gunsights can hardly be expected to carry weight with one whose Parliament has been attacked, as it believes, by its enemy of almost half a century.

A similar pattern of events has unfolded in the Middle East, where terrorist attacks on Israel have been conducted with increasing frequency. There, it is of course Israel that places itself in the role of the United States; the leader of the Palestinian Authority Yasir Arafat that Israel places in the role of the Taliban; and the terrorist organization Hamas that Israel places in the role of the Al Qaeda network in Afghanistan. Prime Minister of Israel Ariel Sharon, employing the Bush formula for purposes that are long-standing, declared Arafat and his regime “directly responsible” for the terrorism and proceeded to cut off all contact with him and then to wage war on the structures of his Authority. If India’s war threatens to destroy the US alliance with Pakistan, Israel’s threatens to collapse the US coalition in the entire Middle East, whose peoples care much more about the suffering of Palestine under Israeli occupation than they do about anything that Al Qaeda might do to the United States. Weapons of mass destruction are involved in this part of the world, too. Israel has an arsenal of some 200 nuclear weapons, and Iran and Iraq reportedly are seeking to build nuclear arsenals. It has also been reported that two of the scientists who helped build Pakistan’s bomb have had wide-ranging discussions on weapons of mass destruction with Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. How long will it be before one of these entities—whether a state or something else—obtains the weapons it seeks, and what will happen in the Middle East then?

The American model has had a clear influence in several other parts of the world. The savage Russian war in Chechnya long predates September 11. Russia had its September 11 on September 9–16, 1999, when three apartment buildings were destroyed and more than 200 people were killed in explosions whose perpetrators have never been identified but that Vladimir Putin attributed to Chechen terrorists. “After the first shock passed, it turned out that we were living in an entirely different country, in which almost no one dared talk about a peaceful, political resolution of the crisis with Chechnya,” human rights activist Sergei Kovalev wrote last year. Describing the national mood that then carried Putin into the presidency, he wrote, “War and only war is the solution!” The war that followed was criticized by the United States and its Western allies—until September 11, when the White House announced that that conflict was also a war on terrorism.

China, too, has joined in the trend. It has broken its customary silence regarding its repression of the Islamic Uighur movement in its western province of Xinjiang, announcing that since our invasion of Afghanistan, it has arrested 2,500 “separatists.” Even tiny Nepal has gotten into the act. It has ended talks with the Maoist insurgency there and turned to military measures.

When the Bush Administration began its war on terrorism, announcing that if you weren’t with us you were against us, did it imagine that from the dizzying heights of its sole superpowerdom it would command the nations, rewarding some, raining bombs on others, and dominating all, according to its sole interest and pleasure? The nations have had other ideas. Preferring American practice to American preaching, they have taken up arms in their own causes, just as previously many built nuclear arsenals whose use again urgently threatens the world. We have not one unified war on terrorism but many clashing wars. It’s hard to say which are more dangerous—those that, like Israel’s, seek to join the American one or those that, like India’s, seem to undercut it. All are burning out of control. For now, the instruments that alone might stop them—negotiation, treaties, a readiness to compromise, measures of disarmament—have been cast aside.
ALEXANDER COCKBURN

You Mean, We Won Something?

It scarcely seems possible, but two of the staple items on the conversational menu of the left these past years might well be on the edge of disappearance, or at least a change in content. Mumia Abu-Jamal is no longer on death row. Pacifica’s wars are amid final settlement. In both instances, it’s a good advertisement for pertinacity. Had it not been for those tireless and oft-ridiculed Mumiacs, I doubt US District Judge William Yohn Jr. would have detected those improper jury instructions. Two years ago the Pacifica National Board thought it had the situation under control, and it was only a matter of time before the ultras were cleaned out of their caves in the mountains of Berkeley. But the much-derided left kept at it.

One good feature of Judge Yohn’s ruling is that it takes the emphasis off innocence or guilt, which surrenders the basic moral axiom of the anti–death penalty cause, namely, that capital punishment is wrong.

As for Pacifica, the heat is now on those who fought the national board to exhaustion and defeat. Can they produce decent programming and hike Pacifica’s dismal low audience figures?

Enron and the Green Seal

The fall of Enron sounds the death knell for one of the great rackets of the past decade: green seals of approval, whereby some outfit like the Natural Resources Defense Council or the Environmental Defense Fund would issue testimonials to the enviro-conscience and selfless devotion to the public weal of corporations like Enron. These green seals of approval were part of the neoliberal pitch, that fuddy-duddy regulation should yield to modern, “market-oriented solutions” to environmental problems. Indeed, NRDC and EDF were always the prime salesfolk of neoliberal remedies for environmental problems. NRDC was socked into the Enron lobby machine so deep you couldn’t see the soles of its feet. Here’s what happened.

In 1997 high-flying Enron found itself in a pitched battle in Oregon, where it planned to acquire Portland General Electric, Oregon’s largest public utility. Warning that Enron’s motives were of a highly predatory nature, the staff of the state’s Public Utility Commission (PUC) opposed the merger. They warned that an Enron takeover would mean less ability to protect the environment, increased insecurity for PGE’s workers and, in all likelihood, soaring prices.

Other critics argued that Enron’s actual plan was to cannibalize PGE, in particular its hydropower, which Enron would sell into California’s energy market.

But at the very moment when such protests threatened to balk Enron of its prize, into town rode NRDC’s top energy commissar, Ralph Cavanagh, Heinz environmental genius award pinned to his armor and flaunting ties to the Energy Foundation, a San Francisco–based outfit providing financial wattage for many citizen and environmental groups that work on utility and enviro issues.

Cavanagh lost no time whipping the refractory Oregon greens into line. In concert with Enron, the NRDC man put together a memo of understanding, pledging that the company would lend financial support to some of these groups’ pet projects. But Cavanagh still had some arduous politicking ahead. An OK for the merger had to come from the PUC, whose staff was adamantly opposed. So, on Valentine’s Day, 1997, Cavanagh showed up at a hearing in Salem, Oregon, to plead Enron’s case.

Addressing the three PUC commissioners, he averred that this was “the first time I’ve ever spoken in support of a utility merger.” If so, it was the quickest transition from virginity to seasoned service in the history of intellectual prostitution. Cavanagh revealed in the delights of an Enron embrace: “What we’ve put before you with this company is, we believe, a robust assortment of public benefits for the citizens of Oregon which would not emerge, Mr. Chairman, without the merger.” With a warble in his throat, Cavanagh moved into rhetorical high gear: “The Oregonian asks the question, ‘Can you trust Enron?’ On stewardship issues and public benefit issues I’ve dealt with this company for a decade, often in the most contentious circumstances, and the answer is, yes.”

Cavanagh won the day for the Houston-based energy giant. The PUC approved the merger, and it wasn’t long before the darkest suspicions of Enron’s plans were vindicated. The company raised rates, tried to soak the ratepayers with the cost of its failed Trojan nuclear reactor and moved to put some of PGE’s most valuable assets on the block. Enron’s motive had indeed been to get access to the hydropower of the Northwest, the cheapest in the country, and sell it into the California market, the priciest and—in part because of Cavanagh’s campaigning for deregulation—a ripe energy prize awaiting exploitation.

Then, after two years, the company Cavanagh had hailed as being “engaged and motivated” put PGE up on the auction block. Pending sale of PGE, Enron has been using it as collateral for loans approved by a federal bankruptcy judge.

Enron is best known as George W. Bush’s prime financial backer in his presidential quest. But it was a bipartisan purveyor of patronage: to its right, conservative Texas Senator Phil Gramm; to its left, liberal Texas Democrat Sheila Jackson-Lee (who had Enron’s CEO Ken Lay as her finance chairman in a Democratic primary fight preluding her first successful Congressional bid; her Democratic opponent was Craig Washington, an anti-NAFTA maverick Democrat the Houston establishment didn’t care for). Today some House Republicans want to treat the Enron collapse as a criminal matter, while Democrats have been talking in vaguer terms about cleaning up accounting rules and plugging holes in the regulatory system. The inability of Enron’s employees to sell company stock from their 401(k)s while high-ups absconded with millions may doom Bush’s promised onslaught on Social Security. There are many morals in Enron’s collapse, and the role of that green seal of approval should not be forgotten.
I've been trying to explain to my 9-year-old what fundamentalism is. He reads enough of the news to have learned that we are at war with a “fundamentalist Islamic regime” in Afghanistan. But he has classmates who identify themselves as fundamentalist Christians; and given the enormous diversity of life in New York, he knows children who belong to each of the world’s major religions and not a few of their sub-orthodoxies. Why is fundamentalism such a bad thing, he wants to know.

What a loaded question, I think to myself as I search for words that would help him understand my distrust of virtually all fundamentalist ideologies—ubiquitous though they be—without also conveying disrespect for his friends. Perhaps there are wiser ways, but I begin by unlinking the question of fundamentalism from any one religion and try to think about a general political meaning—for after all it is with politics that the trouble usually begins.

I think that fundamentalism most frequently reveals itself in a basic relation to language, what linguists might call the notion of transparency. That is, there is very little play between the literal word and the thing to which the word refers. For a common example, if “God” refers literally to the supreme deity, the word itself is made holy, and the careless or playful use of that name constitutes blasphemy—what many call “taking the Lord’s name in vain.” In some traditions, writing or just saying God’s name aloud is an act of hubris. Similarly, the proscription against iconography is a version of this literalism: There can be no human “play” with the representation of the divine.

This can also mean that there is not much room for creativity, figures of speech, irony, plays on words or dissent. Hence, at various moments in American history, theater and fiction were frowned upon as antithetical to religious piety and moral sobriety. As a lawyer, I think of so-called strict constructionists, who assign very literal meanings to the Constitution, who would limit its interpretation only to what the Founding Fathers actually said in 1789.

As a politically engaged citizen, I think of an objectivist friend who hews to the words of Ayn Rand with passionate absolutism. (He used to quote Karl Marx with the same unyielding fervor. The only consistent thing about him is that he still has the nerve to call me a “cultural relativist.”) The eugenics of racial and biological determinism are fed by notions of blood or genes as sacrosanct. And when Mark Hunt, a former West Virginia state legislator, hired Clonaid (a company whose founders believe humans originated as clones of advanced extraterrestrials) to clone his 10-month-old son who died in 1999—well, this, too, is a form of fundamentalism, a fetishism of the body if not of words.

Religion comes from the Latin word religare, to bind back together. Fundamentalism is at root a way of insuring that one’s present life forms a bridge between past and future. All faith does this, I think—links our forebears (whether founding, mythic or ancestral) to the promise of a predictable future (whether in generations to come or in an afterlife). All faiths, including the secular, probably share this basic sense of hope or longing that what we have known in the past will carry us toward a stable future. Even contract law is a way of directing present action so as to link past promises with future expectations; commercial “good faith” and trust in the market are no less ways of protecting ourselves against the chaos of the unknown.

But belief tends to become fundamentalist when it hardens into an expectation of guaranteed outcome. When the present becomes too strictly fixed as that bridge between past and future, the rigidity of ancient injunction takes over as the only true path to salvation in the world-beyond-now. This fixedness of destiny, this sense of outcome being fated, is in general tension with aspects of freedom. Divine (or constitutional) predeterminedness of what shall be imposes constraints on thought, channels behavior and may limit either individual or collective will. Whether this is a disciplining positive or a repressive negative depends on what is at stake, but it is always complex. The very notion of progressivism in American politics, of course, including Martin Luther King’s framing of the civil rights movement, goes back to early American convictions that one’s “manifest destiny” lay in carrying forward a pure (or puritanical) version of the biblical past and ferrying it in a steady line of upward progress toward the perfection of God’s promised New Jerusalem.

The discussion with my son wanders broadly. Almost as an aside, he queries me about a newspaper article he’s found in which the publisher of the Sacramento Bee was booed off the stage by California State University students when she raised concerns about post-9/11 limits on freedom of speech and the press. There is little new or nice, I tell him, about college students heckling speakers they don’t like, but what is peculiarly inverted about this story is that the students seemed to be protesting what was essentially a defense of the very right to protest.

A sense of unremitting loss is what most often drives the fundamentalist desire to preserve ancient, pre-modern or just the last four months of history and enshrine it for the future—even if it means turning the present into a state of absolutist conformity. In that sense, fundamentalism is frequently the byproduct of an inability to accept the finality of death or other great crisis. The angry refusal to let go of grief, in turn, can fuel blind acts of repression. We have never been a nation able to grieve easily or properly—to turn off the jammering on CNN and the yelling on Fox, disconnect the telephone, surround ourselves with friends and come to terms with the magnitude of this tragedy. But we must do something like that in order to move on unencumbered and outspoken, rather than trying to stop time by mutely uncritical allegiance to that day—that unified, yes, but horrifically frozen moment in our lives. Only then can we the people free ourselves sufficiently to tend to the exigencies of a present political order that is still very much ours to redeem.
Idiocy Watch: The New Republic

Eric Alterman

The Nation’s advertising copy promises “vital intelligence in the war against terrorism.” Inside the magazine, its editors publish an “Idiocy Watch” devoted to allegedly dumb things that have been said and written about same. I fear someone has been mixing up the two.

TNR’s editors have not merely been spectacularly wrong about the war but frequently nonsensical. In the magazine’s November 19 editorial, for instance, it complained that we were losing the war because, like President Clinton, who had “stupidly” “ruled out the use of ground forces” in Kosovo, George Bush was now sending “the same lulling message: the United States will not put large numbers of troops on the ground.” Oddly, the very same editorial noted that ethnic cleansing in Kosovo ended only when “Slobodan Milosevic was confronted with the threat of an imminent deployment of American ground forces.” Since Clinton had supposedly ruled that out, one can only imagine who it was that threatened their “imminent deployment.” President Gore?

In that same remarkable editorial, the editors grumbled that US military efforts had “gotten us exactly nowhere.” The clear result: “The Taliban will rule Afghanistan through the winter, thereby handing the United States a humiliating and gratuitous defeat.”

Note that these examples of TNR’s deeply misguided defeatism come only from those articles written under the magazine’s editorial voice. When editor Peter Beinart wrote a TRB column intending to smear The Nation as “anti-American,” he deployed as evidence a single article written by someone whose name appears nowhere on the masthead and who enjoys no institutional affiliation with the magazine. (This was not only sleazy, it was also quite lazy, as some genuine Nation writers would have provided pretty inviting targets if Beinart had bothered.) As any editor knows, a vibrant political magazine must publish articles with American ground forces.” Since Clinton had supposedly ruled that out, one can only imagine who it was that threatened their “imminent deployment.” President Gore?

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While TNR’s editors may have destroyed their credibility as critics of the war, the damage to the public discourse the magazine has wrought does not end there. Over the years, it has helped launch the careers of a bevy of hawkish writers who have carried the talent for malevolent invective with them like a communicable disease. (Involuntary) ex-editors Andrew Sullivan and Michael Kelly are doing their best to revive the tactics of Joe McCarthy and Roy Cohn during this war by whipping up hysteria about “Fifth Columns,” in Sullivan’s words, and those who are, as Kelly put it, “objectively pro-terrorist” when characterizing those deemed to lack sufficient enthusiasm for the current war effort. Ex–senior editor Jacob Heilbrunn also sounded very much like the armchair warriors in his former office. Writing in the Los Angeles Times on November 4, Heilbrunn prematurely credited the Taliban with victory. “His administration has bungled the challenge,” he complained. “The war effort is in deep trouble. The United States is not headed into a quagmire; it’s already in one. The U.S. is not losing the first round against the Taliban; it has already lost it.” This analysis echoed that of former TNR senior editor Charles Krauthammer, who complained on October 30: “The war is not going well. The Taliban have not yielded ground. Not a single important Taliban leader has been killed or captured or has defected.” In virtually every one of these cases, the pundits’ prescription was the same: Bring in the ground troops and expand the fighting or risk humiliation and defeat.

Perhaps most egregious has been the magazine’s vendetta against Secretary of State Colin Powell. When Powell spoke of the need to find a solution so the Israelis and Palestinians could live in peace, the magazine’s editors treated the former general as if he were an underprepared affirmative-action student in a cutthroat Harvard seminar. TNR found “the banality of Colin Powell’s address on American foreign policy” to be “breathtaking.” As if that weren’t churlish enough, the same magazine that provided a cheerleading section for that highly naturalistic and deeply inspirational orator, Al Gore, had the temerity to complain of Powell’s allegedly “irksome manner of the motivational speaker for whom every trivial remark is more proof of his mettle.” TNR went so far as to accuse Powell of providing “a kind of bizarre ratification of Osama bin Laden’s view of the problem.” Why? “There is bin Laden attempting to persuade the Muslim world that what he wants is justice for the Palestinians, and here is Powell attempting to persuade the Muslim world that what he wants is justice for the Palestinians.” Yes, you read that right. Even to appear to care about “justice for the Palestinians” is to give aid and comfort to the terrorist bin Laden. It used to be possible to parody TNR, in the phrase Calvin Trillin borrowed from Frank Mankiewicz, as a “Journalistic Commentary.” But the editors are now occupying so much territory inside the land of self-parody, they might as well build settlements.

While the magazine is home to a number of talented and eloquent liberal writers on many domestic, legal and economic issues, and still boasts some of the finest literary criticism to be found anywhere—along with Elizabeth Rubin’s fine coverage on the ground in Afghanistan—TNR’s post–Kinsley/Hertzberg decline continues apace. No wonder owner Martin Peretz was eager to unload controlling interest in the magazine to investors Michael Steinhardt and Roger Hertog. The latter is also a major funder of the right-wing Manhattan Institute and the American Enterprise Institute. A Washington Post writer who has apparently been either asleep or on Mars in recent decades wondered why a conservative would wish to place his millions at the service of this alleged “liberal bastion.” Duh. A better question is how Peretz managed to pull it off. Politics aside, it can’t be much fun to shell out millions advertising your “intelligence” and attacking others’ “idiocy” only to discover that the entire time, you’ve been looking in the mirror.
No one should be surprised by the polls showing that close to 90 percent of Americans are satisfied with the performance of their selected President, or that close to 80 percent of the citizenry applaud his Administration’s seat-of-the-pants management of an undeclared war. After all, most Americans get their information from media that have pledged to give the American people only the President’s side of the story. CNN chief Walter Isaacson distributed a memo effectively instructing the network’s domestic newscasts to be sugarcoated in order to maintain popular support for the President and his war. Fox News anchors got into a surreal competition to see who could wear the largest American flag lapel pin. Dan Rather, the man who occupies the seat Walter Cronkite once used to tell Lyndon Johnson the Vietnam War was unwinnable, now says, “George Bush is the President…. he wants me to line up, just tell me where.”

No, we should not be surprised that a “just tell me where” press has managed to undermine debate at precisely the time America needs it most—but we should be angry. The role that US newsmedia have played in narrowing and warping the public discourse since September 11 provides dramatic evidence of the severe limitations of contemporary American journalism, and this nation’s media system, when it comes to nurturing a viable democratic and humane society. It is now time to act upon that anger to forge a broader, bolder and more politically engaged movement to reform American media.

The base from which such a movement could spring has already been built. Indeed, the current crisis comes at a critical moment for media reform politics. Since the middle 1980s, when inept and disingenuous reporting on US interventions in Central America provoked tens of thousands of Americans to question the role media were playing in manufacturing consent, media activism has had a small but respectable place on the progressive agenda. The critique has gone well beyond complaints about shoddy journalism to broad expressions of concern about hypercommercial, corporate-directed culture and the corruption of communications policy-making by special-interest lobbies and pliable legislators.

Crucial organizations such as Fairness & Accuracy In Reporting (FAIR), the Institute for Public Accuracy, the MediaChannel, Media Alliance and the Media Education Foundation have emerged over the past two decades. Acting as mainstream media watchdogs while pointing engaged Americans toward valuable alternative fare, these groups have raised awareness that any democratic reform in the United States must include media reform. Although it is hardly universal even among progressives, there is increasing recognition that media reform can no longer be dismissed as a “dependent variable” that will fall into place once the more important struggles have been won. People are beginning to understand that unless we make headway with the media, the more important struggles will never be won.

On the advocacy front, Citizens for Independent Public Broadcasting and People for Better TV are pushing to improve public broadcasting and to tighten regulation of commercial broadcasting. Commercial Alert organizes campaigns against the commercialization of culture, from sports and museums to literature and media. The Center for Digital Democracy and the Media Access Project both work the corridors of power in Washington to win recognition of public-interest values under extremely difficult circumstances. These groups have won some important battles, particularly on Internet privacy issues.
Something Old, Something New

Media Policy in the Digital Age

JEFFREY CHESTER AND GARY O. LARSON

I

t’s become commonplace to divide the media into “old” and “new,” neatly corresponding to analog and digital technology. Under this handy dichotomy the old media (print and broadcast especially) represent mass marketing and mediocrity; conglomerate ownership and economies of scale have produced mainstream, profit-driven programming. Variations occur at the margins, certainly, but even their collective impact pales before the market share of newspaper chains, publishing empires and the assorted television, cable and entertainment giants. In contrast to these old-media oligopolies, the new, digital media—fueled by desktop production and driven by global, networked distribution—seem wildly democratic. So out with the old and in with the new; the World Wide Web awaits!

If only it were that simple. First, the old media aren’t going anywhere, and their dominance in our lives—radio and TV usage still outstrip the Internet by a factor of 20–1—will continue for years. Second, the old media giants have made their presence felt online, too, establishing digital beachheads that might not be making much money (yet) but that are certainly attracting their share of online traffic. This is particularly true of the hybrid (and hydra-headed) AOL Time Warner, whose multimedia reach extends to more than 70 percent of all online users in the United States, and a full third of all time spent online. Thus, even if the long-touted media convergence has been slow in arriving, the distinction between old media and new—particularly with regard to the impact of conglomerate culture—is largely a false one.

That’s why the public-policy battles now being waged to rein in the power of the old media (many of them last-ditch efforts to limit further ownership consolidation and to make the media more publicly accountable) are important to the future of the new media as well—particularly in the areas of ownership limits, spectrum management and noncommercial programming.

A combination of successful court challenges and the ascendant deregulatory spirit in Washington has put the existing cable-ownership limits—currently 30 percent of all cable households nationwide—at risk. As a result, we now face the specter of a single company controlling access to more than half of all households. Broadcast networks and station groups (two of which have already throttled commercial radio) are also poised to tighten their grip on key TV markets by acquiring more stations, far exceeding the current 35 percent national audience limit and further eroding local news and public-affairs programming. Perhaps most alarming, the old prohibitions against one company owning both a TV station and a newspaper, or a cable system and a TV station, in the same community are also under threat. In all these instances, the public’s fundamental right to “the widest possible dissemination of information from diverse and antagonistic sources” (in the words of the Supreme Court) will be jettisoned in favor of lowest-common-denominator shows assembled by the conglomerate multimedia stables. There are more media outlets than ever before, but this numerical growth, as Consumers Union has pointed out, “has not been accompanied by a comparable growth of independent, diversely owned competitive communications services and media voices.”

On one level, spectrum management—literally, the organization and oversight of the radio frequencies that make broadcast and other wireless transmissions possible—is dauntingly complex. But the current battle over spectrum is distressingly simple: In 1996, the nation’s 1,600 TV stations were lent additional spectrum (a six-megahertz slice equal to that over which they’ve been transmitting analog signals for years). According to the FCC’s original timetable, all stations were to be broadcasting digitally by 2003, and by 2006 they were to return their old spectrum (which could then be auctioned off by the government and used for other purposes). For a variety of reasons, the digital TV transition has progressed slowly; in the interim, industry lobbyists have been pressing for stations to be allowed to retain their additional spectrum and put it to various commercial uses, like data transmission, or auction it off themselves. As appalling as that may sound, it is not such a farfetched scheme, given the lobby’s clout and Washington’s belief in finding “marketplace solutions.”

But this kind of corporate welfare is no solution at all. Not only should the spectrum be returned in a timely fashion but a portion of the subsequent auction proceeds should be devoted to noncommercial, public-interest content. Such programming, largely entrusted in the past to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and its PBS grantees, needs a much broader mandate in the digital future. And here, too, old and new media converge. For perhaps now, with the additional capacity that digital broadcasting affords, and with funding derived from the spectrum auctions, we can finally realize the original vision for public-service broadcasting, updated for the digital age. As the Carnegie Commission on Educational Television wrote back in 1967, “We seek for the artist, the technician, the journalist, the scholar, and the public servant freedom to create, freedom to innovate, freedom to be heard in this most far-reaching medium. We seek for the citizen freedom to view, to see programs that the present system, by its incompleteness, denies him.”

The emerging broadband networks, which promise to bring broadcast and online technologies together in a platform that fosters interactivity and exchange, has the potential finally to realize that vision—but only if public-interest policies are in place insuring that the old-media giants won’t be able to stifle competition and diversity in the new-media environment, too.

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In addition, local media watch groups have surfaced across the nation. Citizens’ organizations do battle to limit billboards in public places and to combat the rise of advertising in schools—fighting often successfully to keep Channel One ads, corporate-sponsored texts and fast-food promotions out of classrooms and cafeterias. Innovative lawsuits challenging the worst excesses of media monopoly are being developed by regional groups such as Rocky Mountain Media Watch and a national consortium of civic organizations, lawyers and academics that has drawn support from Unitarian Universalist organizations. Media activists in Honolulu and San Francisco have joined with unions and community groups to prevent the closure of daily newspapers that provided a measure of competition and debate in those cities.

Despite all these achievements, however, the media reform movement remains at something of a standstill. The sheer corruption of US politics is itself a daunting obstacle. The Center for Public Integrity in 2000 issued “Off the Record: What Media Corporations Don’t Tell You About Their Legislative Agendas”—an alarming expose of the huge lobbying machines employed by the largest communications corporations and their trade associations, as well as the considerable campaign contributions they make. According to the center, the fifty largest media companies and four of their trade associations spent $111.3 million between 1996 and mid-2000 to lobby Congress and the executive branch. Between 1993 and mid-2000, the center determined, media corporations and their employees have given $75 million in campaign contributions to candidates for federal office and to the two major political parties. Regulators and politicians tend therefore to be in the pockets of big-spending corporate communications lobbies, and—surprise, surprise—the corporate newsmedia rarely cover media policy debates. Notwithstanding all the good work by media activists, the “range” of communications policy debate in Washington still tends to run all the way from GE to GM, to borrow a line from FAIR’s Jeff Cohen.

At this very moment, for example, the FCC is considering the elimination of the remaining restrictions on media consolidation, including bans on cross-ownership by a single firm of TV stations and newspapers in the same community, and limits on the number of TV stations and cable TV systems a single corporation may own nationwide. The corporate media lobbying superstars are putting a full-court press on the FCC—which, with George W. Bush’s imprint now firmly on its membership, is now even more pro-corporate than during the Clinton years. The proposed scrapping of these regulations will increase the shareholder value of numerous media firms dramatically, and will undoubtedly inspire a massive wave of mergers and acquisitions. If the lessons of past ownership deregulation—particularly the 1996 relaxation of radio ownership rules—are any guide, we can expect even less funding for journalism and more commercialism. All of this takes place without scrutiny from major media, and therefore is unknown to all but a handful of Americans.

Despite its successes, the media reform movement is at something of a standstill. The sheer corruption of US politics is one obstacle.

The immensity of the economic and political barriers to democratic action has contributed to demoralization about the prospects for structural media reform and an understandable turn to that which progressives can hope to control: their own media. So it has been that much energy has gone into the struggle over the future of the Pacifica radio chain, which looks at long last to be heading toward a viable resolution. The Independent Press Association has grown dramatically to nurture scores of usually small, struggling nonprofit periodicals, which are mostly progressive in orientation. And dozens of local Independent Media Centers have mushroomed on the Internet over the past two years. These Indy Media Centers take advantage of new technology to provide dissident and alternative news stories and commentary; some, by focusing on local issues, have become a genuine alternative to established media at a level where that alternative can and does shift the dialogue. We have seen the positive impact of the IMC movement firsthand—in Seattle, in Washington, at the 2000 Democratic and Republican national conventions, at the three lamentable presidential debates later that year, during the Florida recount and in the aftermath of September 11 in New York and other cities. It is vital that this and other alternative media movements grow in scope and professionalism.

Yet, as important as this work is, there are inherent limits to what can be done with independent media, even with access to the Internet. Too often, the alternative media remain on the margins, seeming to confirm that the dominant structures are the natural domain of the massive media conglomerates that supposedly “give the people what they want.”

The trouble with this disconnect between an engaged and vital alternative media and a disengaged and stenographic dominant media is that it suggests a natural order in which corporate media have mastered the marketplace on the basis of their wit and wisdom. In fact, our media system is not predominantly the result of free-market competition. Huge promotional budgets and continual rehashing of tried and true formulas play their role in drawing viewers, listeners and readers to dominant print and broadcast media. But their dominance is still made possible, in large part, by explicit government policies and subsidies that permit the creation of large and profitable conglomerates. When the government grants free monopoly rights to TV spectrum, for example, it is not setting the terms of competition; it is picking the winner of the competition. Such policies amount to an annual grant of corporate welfare that economist Dean Baker values in the tens of billions of dollars. These decisions have been made in the public’s name, but without the public’s informed consent. We must not accept such massive subsidies for wealthy corporations, nor should we content ourselves with the “freedom” to forge an alternative that occupies the margins. Our task is to return “informed consent” to media policy-making and to gen-

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A New Contract

NEW JOBS FOR

We have entered the Third Millennium through a gate of fire. If today, after September 11, we see better and we see farther, we will realize that humanity is indivisible.” Kofi Annan’s beautiful words point the way to the future. A more compassionate America will be a more secure America. These are not Utopian dreams. Every pledge on these pages is within our power to fulfill. And they will cost no more than we spend now. We call on our government to:

1. ATTACK WORLD HUNGER AND POVERTY AS IF OUR LIFE DEPENDS ON IT: IT DOES.
Anchor our foreign policy in the compassion for the poor that unites all the world’s religions. Reduce the debts of impoverished countries. End America’s sad history as the world’s leading exporter of weapons. Shift foreign aid from buying weapons to feeding people.

2. CHAMPION THE RIGHTS OF EVERY CHILD, WOMAN AND MAN.
Make America stand for justice, not expediency. Stop turning a blind eye to governments that abuse their own people. Ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. If punishing a foreign tyrant means, in actual practice, punishing the women and children who are his victims, desist, and find another path.

3. PAY OUR UN DUES UNGRUDGINGLY AND END OUR OBSTRUCTIONISM TO THE WORLD’S TREATIES.
Throw America’s full weight behind the United Nations. Pay our UN dues on time and without conditions. Withdraw our lonely vetoes of the landmine ban, the bans on chemical and biological weapons, the Kyoto Accords and the International Criminal Court. Show once again the “decent respect for the opinions of mankind” that our Declaration of Independence affirms.

4. REDUCE OUR DEPENDENCE ON OIL.
Oil holds us hostage to regimes hated by their own people; their hatred transfers to us. America is 5% of the world’s people but we generate 25% of the pollution that causes global warming. It’s our duty to lead. We will reduce our consumption 25% by 2010.

5. LEAD THE WORLD TO AN AGE OF RENEWABLE ENERGY.
Make a Moon Mission scale commitment to develop solar and wind power technologies. Set and meet a goal of 20% of our energy from renewable sources by 2010.

6. CLOSE THE BOOK ON THE COLD WAR AND END THE NUCLEAR NIGHTMARE FOREVER.
Cast a cold eye on giant weapons designed to destroy giant enemies that no longer exist. Cancel obsolete Cold War weapons. We applaud the nuclear force cuts the President announced, but even 2,000 warheads poised and aimed at Russia is unwise. We squander $35 billion a year on this obsolete arsenal. Save most of that money, take our missiles off “launch on warning” and invite all nuclear nations to negotiate a nuclear weapons ban.
7. RENOUNCE STAR WARS AND THE MILITARIZATION OF SPACE.
Reaffirm the ABM treaty. After spending $134 billion dollars (twice our lifetime commitment to cancer research!) our military has nothing to show for its obsession with a dubious National Missile Defense but the deep suspicions of our new allies. Enough is enough.

8. MAKE GLOBALIZATION WORK FOR, NOT AGAINST, WORKING PEOPLE.
Open the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to the public. Let sunshine into the councils of the World Trade Organization and the North American Fair Trade Agreement. Affirm that the welfare of the planet’s people supersedes corporate patents and profits.

9. GET MONEY OUT OF POLITICS.
Curtail the vast corrupting influence of corporate campaign contributions, which make Congress beholden to private interests. Enact public campaign financing—we can fund it entirely by closing a single offshore tax loophole!

10. CLOSE THE GAP BETWEEN RICH AND POOR AT HOME.
All these words will ring hollow to the world if America does not close the chasm between Rich and Poor in our own society. We will fully fund Head Start and healthcare insurance for the millions of American children who can’t get either, and invest the money needed to build and nourish schools worthy of this great nation.

A New Contract With The Planet is a joint venture of a growing list of advocacy groups. All of us share a commitment to bring America’s global policies into harmony with the common sense and common decency of the American people. The Contract is a work in progress. We invite your suggestions. Visit our website at www.ContractWithThePlanet.org.
erate a diverse media system that serves our democratic needs.

In our view, what’s needed to begin the job is now crystal clear—a national media reform coalition that can play quarterback for the media reform movement. The necessity argument takes two forms.

First, the immense job of organizing media reform requires that our scarce resources be used efficiently, and that the various components of a media reform movement cooperate strategically. The problem is that the whole of the current media reform movement is significantly less than the sum of its parts. Isolated and impoverished, groups are forced to defend against new corporate initiatives rather than advance positive reform proposals. When they do get around to proposing reforms, activists have occasionally worked on competing agendas; such schisms dissipate energy, squander resources and guarantee defeat.

More important, they are avoidable. Organizers of this new coalition could begin by convening a gathering of all the groups now struggling for reform, as well as the foundations and nonprofits willing to support their work. “All the issues we talk about are interlinked. We are fighting against a lot of the same corporations. The corporations, while they supposedly compete with one another, actually work together very well when it comes to lobbying,” explains Jeffrey Chester of the Center for Digital Democracy. “We need to link up the activists and start to work together as well as the corporations do for the other side.” Will every possible member organization get on the same media reform page? No. But after years of working with these groups in various settings, we have no doubt that most will.

Second, a coherent, focused and well-coordinated movement will be needed to launch a massive outreach effort to popularize the issue. That outreach can, and should, be guided by Saul Alinsky’s maxim that the only way to beat organized money is with organized people. If the media reform movement stays within the Beltway, we know that we will always lose. Yet, so far, outreach beyond the core community of media activists has been done on a piecemeal basis by various reform groups and critics with very limited budgets. The results have, by and large, been predictably disappointing. As a result, says Representative Jesse Jackson Jr., “the case for media reform is not being heard in Washington now. It is not easy to make the case heard for any reform these days. That’s why we need to do more. I hear people everywhere around the country complaining about the media, but we have yet to figure out how to translate those complaints into some kind of activist agenda that can begin to move Congress. There has to be more pressure from outside Washington for specific reforms. Members have to start hearing in their home districts that there is a wide range of other media reform proposals. If an organized movement demands it, there are people in Congress with the courage and the awareness to provide it with a legislative focus.

Ultimately, we believe, the movement’s legislative agenda must include proposals to:

§ Apply existing antimonopoly laws to the media and, where necessary, expand the reach of those laws to restrict ownership of radio stations to one or two per owner. Legislators should also consider steps to address monopolization of TV-station ownership and media system. Organized labor, educators, progressive religious groups, journalists, artists, feminists, environmental organizations and civil rights groups are obvious candidates.

These groups will not simply fall into place as coalition partners, however. Media corporations do not just lobby Congress; they lobby a lot of the groups that suffer under the current system. Some of those groups have been bought off by contributions from foundations associated with AOL, Verizon and other communications conglomerates; others—particularly large sections of organized labor—have been convinced that they have a vested interest in maintaining a status quo that consistently kicks them in the teeth. Building a broad coalition will require a tremendous amount of education and old-fashioned organizing that will inevitably involve pressure from the grassroots on major institutions and unions in order to get the national leadership of those organizations to engage. Movement-building will require that able organizers like Chester, Cohen, FAIR’s Janine Jackson and Media Alliance executive director Jeff Perlstein—who have already been engaged in the struggle—be provided with the resources to travel, organize and educate.

All the organizing in the world won’t amount to a hill of beans, however, unless there is something tangible to fight for, and to win. That’s why we need reform proposals that can be advocated, promoted and discussed. Media reform needs its equivalent of the Voting Rights Act or the Equal Rights Amendment—simple, basic reforms that grassroots activists can understand, embrace and advocate in union halls, church basements and school assemblies. And there has to be legislation to give the activism a sense of focus and possibility.

Fortunately, there are several members of Congress who are already engaged on these issues: Senator Fritz Hollings has emerged as a thoughtful critic of many of the excesses of media monopolies; Senator John McCain has questioned the giveaway of public airwaves to communications conglomerates; Representative John Conyers Jr., the ranking Democrat on the House Judiciary Committee, has been outspoken in criticizing the loss of diversity in media ownership and the failure of the FCC to battle monopolization and homogenization; Representative Louise Slaughter has introduced legislation mandating free airtime for political candidates; Senator Paul Wellstone has expressed an interest in legislation that would reassert standards for children’s programming and perhaps adopt the approaches of other countries that regulate advertising directed at young children; and Jesse Jackson Jr. has expressed a willingness to introduce legislation aimed at broadening access to diverse media, along with a wide range of other media reform proposals. If an organized movement demands it, there are people in Congress with the courage and the awareness to provide it with a legislative focus.
move to break the lock of newspaper chains on entire regions.
§ Initiate a formal, federally funded study and hearings to identify reasonable media ownership regulations across all sectors.
§ Establish a full tier of low-power, noncommercial radio and television stations across the nation.
§ Revamp and invest in public broadcasting to eliminate commercial pressures, reduce immediate political pressures and serve communities without significant disposable incomes.
§ Allow every taxpayer a $200 tax credit to apply to any nonprofit medium, as long as it meets IRS criteria.
§ Lower mailing costs for nonprofit and significantly noncommercial publications.
§ Eliminate political candidate advertising as a condition of a broadcast license, or require that if a station runs a paid political ad by a candidate it must run free ads of similar length from all the other candidates on the ballot immediately afterward.
§ Reduce or eliminate TV advertising directed at children under 12.
§ Decommercialize local TV news with regulations that require stations to grant journalists an hour daily of commercial-free news time, and set budget guidelines for those newscasts based on a percentage of the station's revenues.

We know from experience that many of these ideas are popular with Americans—when they get a chance to hear about them. Moreover, the enthusiasm tends to cross the political spectrum. Much of our optimism regarding a media reform movement is based on our research that shows how assiduously the corporate media lobbies work to keep their operations in Washington out of public view. They suspect the same thing we do: When people hear about the corruption of communications policy-making, they will be appalled. When people understand that it is their democratic right to reform this system, millions of them will be inclined to exercise that right.

What media policy-making needs is to be bathed in democracy. The coalition we envision will have its similarities to the civil rights movement or the women's movement—as it should, since access to information ought to be seen as a fundamental human right. It will stand outside political parties and encourage all of them to take up the mantle of democratic media reform, much as Britain's impressive Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom has done. Although its initial funding may well come from large grants, this reform coalition ultimately must be broad-based and member-funded, like Greenpeace or, dare we say it, the National Rifle Association. Activists must feel a sense of ownership and attachment to a citizen lobby if it is to have real impact. We understand that success will depend, over the long term, upon a rejuvenation of popular politics and, accordingly, a decrease in corporate political and economic power. At the same time, we are certain that a movement that expands the range of legitimate debate will ultimately change not just the debate but the current system. “I am convinced that when people start talking about these big issues, these fundamental issues, when they start to understand that they have the power as citizens in a democracy to take on the powers that be and change how things are done, then change becomes inevitable,” says Jackson. “The challenge, of course, is to get people to recognize that they have that power.”

Even before it gets down to the serious business of reforming existing media systems, the coalition we propose can lead an organized resistance to corporate welfare schemes like the proposed FCC deregulation. And it might even be able to prevent the complete corporatization of the Internet [see Jeffrey Chester and Gary O. Larson, “Something Old, Something New,” page 12]. The key is to have a network of informed organizations and individuals who are already up to speed on media issues and can swing into action on short notice. Currently that network does not exist. The heroic public-interest groups that now lead the fight to oppose corporate domination of FCC policies find themselves without sufficient popular awareness or support, and therefore without the leverage they need to prevail. The movement we propose will be all about increasing leverage over the FCC and Congress in the near term, with an eye toward structural reform down the road.

But is it really possible that such a coalition can take shape in the months and years to come and begin to shift the debate? History tells us that the possibility is real. At times of popular political resurgence throughout the twentieth century, media activism surfaced as a significant force. It was most intense in the Progressive Era, when the rise of the modern capitalist media system was met with sustained Progressive and radical criticism from the likes of Upton Sinclair, Eugene Victor Debs and Robert La Follette. In the 1930s a heterogeneous movement arose to battle commercial broadcasting, and a feisty consumer movement organized to limit advertising in our society. In the postwar years, the Congress of Industrial Organizations attempted to establish a national FM radio network, one of the first casualties of the war on independent labor and the left that marked that period. In the 1960s and '70s the underground press provided vital underpinning for the civil rights, antiwar and feminist movements.

In short, we are building on a long tradition. And there is considerable momentum at present to coalesce. In November some thirty-five media activists from all over the nation met for a day in New York to begin coordinating some of their activities on a range of issues, from local and national policy matters to creating alternative media. Leading media scholars and educators are forming a new national progressive media literacy organization, one that will remain independent of the media conglomerates that bankroll existing groups. We are excited by speculation that Bill Moyers, who has done so much to drum up funding for reform initiatives, will in 2002 use his considerable influence to convince progressive foundations to make a genuine commitment to this fundamental democratic initiative.

The bottom line is clear. Until reformers come together, until we create a formal campaign to democratize our communications policy-making and to blast open our media system, we will continue to see special issues of The Nation like this one lamenting our situation. We need no more proof than the current moment to tell us that the time to build a broad coalition for media reform has arrived.
For all their economic clout and cultural sway, the ten great multinationals profiled in our latest chart—AOL Time Warner, Disney, General Electric, News Corporation, Viacom, Vivendi, Sony, Bertelsmann, AT&T and Liberty Media—rule the cosmos only at the moment. The media cartel that keeps us fully entertained and permanently half-informed is always growing here and shriveling there, with certain of its members bulking up while others slowly fall apart or get digested whole. But while the players tend to come and go—with a few exceptions—the overall Leviathan itself keeps getting bigger, louder, brighter, forever taking up more time and space, in every street, in countless homes, in every other head.

The rise of the cartel has been a long time coming (and it still has some way to go). It represents the grand convergence of the previously disparate US culture industries—many of them vertically monopolized already—into one global superindustry providing most of our imaginary “content.” The movie business had been largely dominated by the major studios in Hollywood; TV, like radio before it, by the triune axis of the networks headquartered in New York; magazines, primarily by Henry Luce (with many independent others on the scene); and music, from the 1960s, mostly by the major record labels. Now all those separate fields are one, the whole terrain divided up among the giants—which, in league with Barnes & Noble, Borders and the big distributors, also control the book business. (Even with its leading houses, book publishing was once a cottage industry at both the editorial and retail levels.) For all the democratic promise of the Internet, moreover, much of cyberspace has now been occupied, its erstwhile wildernesses swiftly paved and lighted over by the same colossi. The only industry not yet absorbed into this new world order is the newsprint sector of the Fourth Estate—a business that was heavily shadowed to begin with by the likes of Hearst and other, regional grandees, flush with the ill-gotten gains of oil, mining and utilities—and such absorption is, as we shall see, about to happen.

Thus what we have today is not a problem wholly new in kind but rather the disastrous upshot of an evolutionary process whereby that old problem has become considerably larger—and that great quantitative change, with just a few huge players now co-directing all the nation’s media, has brought about enormous qualitative changes. For one thing, the cartel’s rise has made extremely rare the sort of marvelous exception that has always popped up, unexpectedly, to startle and revivify the culture—the genuine independents among record labels, radio stations, movie theaters, newspapers, book publishers and so on. Those that don’t fail nowadays are so remarkable that they inspire not emulation but amazement. Otherwise, the monoculture, endlessly and noisily triumphant, offers, by and large, a lot of nothing, whether packaged as “the news” or “entertainment.”

Of all the cartel’s dangerous consequences for American society and culture, the worst is its corrosive influence on journalism. Under AOL Time Warner, GE, Viacom et al., the news is, with a few exceptions, yet another version of the entertainment that the cartel also vends nonstop. This is also nothing new—consider the newreels of yesteryear—but the gigantic scale and thoroughness of the corporate concentration has made a world of difference, and so has made this world a very different place.

Let us start to grasp the situation by comparing this new
centerfold with our first outline of the National Entertainment State, published in the spring of 1996. Back then, the national TV news appeared to be a tidy tetrarchy: two network news divisions owned by large appliance makers/weapons manufacturers (CBS by Westinghouse, NBC by General Electric), and the other two bought lately by the nation’s top purveyors of Big Fun (ABC by Disney, CNN by Time Warner). Cable was still relatively immature, so that, of its many enterprises, only CNN competed with the broadcast networks’ short-staffed newsrooms; and its buccaneering founder, Ted Turner, still seemed to call the shots from his new aerie at Time Warner headquarters.

Today the telejournalistic firmament includes the meteoric Fox News Channel, as well as twenty-six television stations owned outright by Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation (which holds majority ownership in a further seven). Although ultimately thwarted in his bid to buy DirecTV and thereby dominate the US satellite television market, Murdoch wields a pervasive influence on the news—and not just in New York, where he has two TV stations, a major daily (the faltering New York Post) and the Fox News Channel, whose inexhaustible plateaux of shouting heads attracts a fierce plurality of cable-viewers. Meanwhile, Time Warner has now merged with AOL—so as to own the cyberworks through which to market its floodtide of movies, ball games, TV shows, rock videos, standup routines and (not least) bits from CNN, CNN Headline News, CNNfn (devised to counter GE’s CNBC) and CNN/Sports Illustrated (a would-be rival to Disney’s ESPN franchise). While busily cloning CNN, the parent company has also taken quiet steps to make it more like Fox, with Walter Isaacson, the new head honcho, even visiting the Capitol to seek advice from certain rightist pols on how, presumably, to make the network even shallower and more obnoxious. (He also courted Rush Himself.) All this has occurred since the abrupt defenestration of Ted Turner, who now belatedly laments the overconcentration of the cable business: “It’s sad we’re losing so much diversity of thought,” he confesses, sounding vaguely like a writer for this magazine.

Whereas five years ago the clueless Westinghouse owned CBS, today the network is a property of the voracious Viacom—matchless cable occupier (UPN, MTV, MTV2, VH1, Nickelodeon, the Movie Channel, TNN, CMT, BET, 50 percent of Comedy Central, etc.), radio colossus (its Infinity Broadcasting—home to Howard Stern and Don Imus—owns 184 stations), movie titan (Paramount Pictures), copious publisher (Simon & Schuster, Free Press, Scribner), a big deal on the web and one of the largest US outdoor advertising firms. Under Viacom, CBS News has been obliged to help sell Viacom’s product—in 2000, for example, devoting epic stretches of The Early Show to what lately happened on Survivor (CBS). Of course, such synergistic bilge is commonplace, as is the tendency to dummy up on any topic that the parent company (or any of its advertisers) might want stilled. These journalistic sins have been as frequent under “longtime” owners Disney and GE as under Viacom and Fox [see Janine Jaquet, “The Sins of Synergy,” page 20]. They may also abound beneath Vivendi, whose recent purchase of the film and TV units of USA Networks and new stake in the satellite TV giant EchoStar—moves too recent for inclusion in our chart—could soon mean lots of oblique self-promotion on USAM News, in L’Express and L’Expansion, and through whatever other news-machines the parent buys.

Such is the telejournalistic landscape at the moment—and soon it will mutate again, if Bush’s FCC delivers for its giant clients. On September 13, when the minds of the American people were on something else, the commission’s GOP majority voted to “review” the last few rules preventing perfect oligopoly. They thus prepared the ground for allowing a single outfit to own both a daily paper and a TV station in the same market—an advantage that was outlawed in 1975. (Even then, pre-existing cases of such ownership were grandfathered in, and any would-be owner could get that rule waived.) That furtive FCC “review” also portended the elimination of the cap on the percentage of US households that a single owner might reach through its TV stations. Since the passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, the limit had been 35 percent. Although that most indulgent bill was dictated by the media giants themselves, its restrictions are too heavy for this FCC, whose chairman, Michael Powell, has called regulation per se “the oppressor.” And so, unless there’s some effective opposition, the several-headed vendor that now sells us nearly all our movies, TV, radio, magazines, books, music and web services will soon be selling us our daily papers, too—for the major dailies have, collectively, been lobbying energetically for that big waiver, which stands to make their owners even richer (an expectation that has no doubt had a sweetening effect on coverage of the Bush Administration). Thus the largest US newspaper conglomerates—the New York Times, the Washington Post, Gannett, Knight-Ridder and the Tribune Co.—will soon be formal partners with, say, GE, Murdoch, Disney and/or AT&T; and then the lesser nationwide chains (and the last few independents) will be ingested, too, going the way of most US radio stations. America’s cities could turn into informational “company towns,” with one behemoth owning all the local print organs—daily paper(s), alternative weekly, city magazine—as well as the TV and radio stations, the multiplexes and the cable system. (Recently a federal appeals court told the FCC to drop its rule preventing any one company from serving more than 30 percent of US cable subscribers; and in December, the Supreme Court refused to hear the case.) While such a setup may make economic sense, as anti-competitive arrangements tend to do, it has no place in a democracy, where the people have to know more than their masters want to tell them.

That imperative demands reaffirmation at this risky moment, when much of what the media cartel purveys to us is propaganda, commercial or political, while no one in authority makes mention of “the public interest”—except to laugh it off. “I have no idea,” Powell cheerily replied at his first press conference as chairman, when asked for his own definition of that crucial concept. “It’s an empty vessel in which people pour in whatever their preconceived views or biases are.” Such blithe obtuseness has marked all his public musings on the subject. In a
speech before the American Bar Association in April 1998, Powell offered an ironic little riff about how thoroughly he doesn’t get it: “The night after I was sworn in [as a commissioner], I waited for a visit from the angel of the public interest. I waited all night, but she did not come.” On the other hand, Powell has never sounded glib about his sacred obligation to the corporate interest. Of his decision to move forward with the FCC vote just two days after 9/11, Powell spoke as if that sneaky move had been a gesture in the spirit of Patrick Henry: “The flame of the American ideal may flicker, but it will never be extinguished. We will do our small part and press on with our business, solemnly, but resolutely.”

Certainly the FCC has never been a democratic force, whichever party has been dominant. Bill Clinton championed the disastrous Telecom Act of 1996 and otherwise did almost nothing to impede the drift toward oligopoly. (As Newsweek reported in 2000, Al Gore was Rupert Murdoch’s personal choice for President. The mogul apparently sensed that Gore would happily play ball with him, and also thought—correctly—that the Democrat would win.)

What is unique to Michael Powell, however, is the showy superciliousness with which he treats his civic obligation to address the needs of people other than the very rich. That spirit has shown forth many times—as when the chairman genially compared the “digital divide” between the information haves and have-nots to a “Mercedes divide” between the lucky few who can afford great cars and those (like him) who can’t. In the intensity of his pro-business bias, Powell recalls Mark Fowler, head of Reagan’s FCC, who famously denied his social obligations by asserting that TV is merely “an appliance,” “a toaster with pictures.” And yet such Reaganite bons mots, fraught with the anti-Communist fanaticism of the late cold war, evinced a deadly earnestness that’s less apparent in General Powell’s son. He is a blithe, postmodern sort of ideologue, attuned to the complacent smirk of modern Bush the Younger—and, of course, just perfect for the cool and snickering culture of TV.

Although such flippancies are hard to take, they’re also easy to refute, for there is no rationale for such an attitude. Take “the public interest”—an ideal that really isn’t hard to understand. A media system that enlightens us, that tells us everything we need to know pertaining to our lives and liberty and happiness, would be a system dedicated to the public interest. Such a system would not be controlled by a cartel of giant corporations, because those entities are ultimately hostile to the welfare of the people. Whereas we need to know the truth about such corporations, they often have an interest in suppressing it (as do their advertisers). And while it takes much time and money to find out the truth, the parent companies prefer to cut the necessary costs of journalism, much preferring the sort of lurid fare that can drive endless hours of agitation and jabbering. (Prior to 9/11, it was Monica, then Survivor and Chandra Levy, whereas, since the fatal day, we have had mostly

The Wages of Synergy

The synergies are under every rock we turn over,” declared Michael Eisner when the Mouse Kingdom absorbed Capital Cities/ABC in 1996, the same year The Nation’s National Entertainment State made its debut. Ever since, the media conglomerates have indeed been looking in every nook and cranny of their ever-expanding empires for ways to cross-promote. This fall, AOL Time Warner left no stone unturned in heralding the release of its smash hit movie Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone. By enlisting its considerable forces—AOL, its TV networks (HBO, CNN, WB and the Cartoon Network), its magazines (including Time, Entertainment Weekly and People) and its ticketing operation, Moviefone—AOL Time Warner worked marketing magic. By opening weekend, surveys showed an incredible 100 percent awareness among moviegoers that Harry Potter was coming to a cineplex near them. You had to be under a rock to miss this one.

But when it comes to conjuring corporate synergies, not even Harry Potter’s wand is as potent as the network news. Soon after the Disney merger, Good Morning America was broadcasting live from Disneyland to mark the theme park’s twenty-fifth anniversary. Even then, as the era of megamergers was just beginning, it was clear that there was, as New Yorker media critic Ken Auletta put it, “scant evidence that synergy is journalism’s friend.” As time passed, evidence to the contrary began to pile up: News Corporation axed the BBC from its satellite TV service in China so as not to offend the government there; CBS sat on a 60 Minutes story about Big Tobacco that might have jeopardized its upcoming merger with Westinghouse; and ABC shelved a report about pedophiles at Disney World. Less sensational instances of corporate meddling are now viewed as business as usual, with only media critics and other pointyheads bothering to protest parent-company encroachment on network news time.

Disney is hardly alone in the relentless-self-promotion department. CBS flogged Survivor with plugs on its news shows. Asked last summer on CNN’s Reliable Sources about guarding the line between the news and entertainment divisions, CBS’s Early Show executive producer, Steve Friedman, was unapologetic: “That line was crossed a long time ago…. Now you can lament and say it’s terrible. You can say it’s over, the civilization is over. You know what, to compete you’ve got to compete. And we are in this to win. And we will use this show to help us win.”

That line does seem to belong to some distant past. A November 19 report by the Project for Excellence in Journalism found that the morning network news shows spent 33 percent of their air time selling something; on average 20 percent of the stories were for books, movies, TV shows, music or products their company produced. The study noted that the network’s ownership of such products wasn’t always disclosed. Friedman told the Boston Globe that while misrepresentation was wrong, complete disclosure was impractical. “We only have two hours a day. You’re going to spend all your time just [disclosing] ownership.”

Here’s another solution: Go back to doing news.

Janine Jaquet

Janine Jaquet, an independent producer, teaches media studies at NYU. Research support for this article and the media chart (page 27) was provided by the Investigative Fund of the Nation Institute.
Re-affirming our commitment to peace in the Middle East through social justice, generosity, and open-hearted sharing of the land. Security for Israel will come through an end of the Occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, a return of the settlers to the pre-1967 borders of Israel, reparations for Palestinian refugees—and a total renunciation of violence (including rock-throwing) by the Palestinian people (adopting the strategy of Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.).

Developing progressive strategies for the post-Taliban world by creating an alternative to the corporate version of modernity—the globalization of capital—as well as the fundamentalist reaction to it. We seek to build an Emancipatory Spirituality and a New Bottom Line for American society based on love and caring, awe and wonder at the grandeur of creation.

Saying “No” to Ashcroft’s assault on civil liberties and developing strategies to safeguard our democracy from Nixon-era FBI tactics that in no way guarantee our safety.

Creating a new kind of network of spiritual progressives who are deeply committed to the Founding Principles of the TIKKUN Community (described at www.Tikkun.org) and who grow to be deeply committed to each other. In other words, a life-long support network.

The Tikkun Community envisions a world based on love, generosity, open-heartedness, economic justice, human rights, and recognition of the sanctity of every human being on the planet. We have an obligation to protect the earth from the hurtful impact of global capital, by replacing the globalization of selfishness with the globalization of Spirit. Our objectives for the conference include:

* Re-affirming our commitment to peace in the Middle East through social justice, generosity, and open-hearted sharing of the land. Security for Israel will come through an end of the Occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, a return of the settlers to the pre-1967 borders of Israel, reparations for Palestinian refugees—and a total renunciation of violence (including rock-throwing) by the Palestinian people (adopting the strategy of Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.).

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The Tikkun Community is not just for Jews

We welcome people from every spiritual path, including atheists who have rightly critiqued the reactionary role that some forms of spirituality have played in the past. This is a spirituality rooted in social justice, committed to gay and lesbian rights, rational and scientific thinking, and ecological sanity. Help us foster a planetary consciousness for the 21st century.

Don’t miss this event. To register go to www.tikkun.org, email community@tikkun.org, or call 415-575-1200. If you can’t come, you can still join the TIKKUN Community and work with us. And please subscribe to Tikkun magazine: $29 to 2107 Van Ness Ave., Suite 302, San Francisco, CA 94109.
against the daily combination of those corporate tendencies—conflict of interest, endless cutbacks, endless trivial pursuits, class bias, deference to the king and all his men—the public interest doesn’t stand a chance. Despite the stubborn fiction of their “liberal” prejudice, the corporate media have helped deliver a stupendous one-two punch to this democracy. (That double whammy followed their uncritical participation in the long, irrelevant jihad against those moderate Republicans, the Clintons.) Last year, they helped subvert the presidential race, first by prematurely calling it for Bush, regardless of the vote—a move begun by Fox, then seconded by NBC, at the personal insistence of Jack Welch, CEO of General Electric. Since the coup, the corporate media have hidden or misrepresented the true story of the theft of that election.

And having justified Bush/Cheney’s coup, the media continue to betray American democracy. Media devoted to the public interest would investigate the poor performance by the CIA, the FBI, the FAA and the CDC, so that those agencies might be improved for our protection—but the news teams (just like Congress) haven’t bothered to look into it. So, too, in the public interest, should the media report on all the current threats to our security—including those far-rightists targeting abortion clinics and, apparently, conducting bioterrorism; but the telejournalists are unconcerned (just like John Ashcroft). So should the media highlight, not play down, this government’s attack on civil liberties—the mass detentions, secret evidence, increased surveillance, suspension of attorney-client privilege, the encouragements to spy, the warnings not to disagree, the censored images, sequestered public papers, unexpected visits from the Secret Service and so on. And so should the media not parrot what the Pentagon says about the current war, because such prettified accounts make us complacent and preserve us in our fatal ignorance of what people really think of us—and why—beyond our borders. And there’s much more—about the stunning exploitation of the tragedy, especially by the Republicans; about the links between the Bush and the bin Laden families; about the ongoing shenanigans in Florida—that the media would let the people know, if they were not (like Michael Powell) indifferent to the public interest.

In short, the news divisions of the media cartel appear to work against the public interest—and for their parent companies, their advertisers and the Bush Administration. The situation is completely un-American. It is the purpose of the press to help us run the state, and not the other way around. As citizens of a democracy, we have the right and obligation to be well aware of what is happening, both in “the homeland” and the wider world.

Without such knowledge we cannot be both secure and free. We therefore must take steps to liberate the media from oligopoly, so as to make the government our own.

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**Take This Media…Please!**

After compiling our guide to the “Big Ten” media conglomerates, we shared it with cultural producers and critics in a range of fields: music, journalism, television, publishing. Following are their comments.

—The Editors

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**Al Franken**

Al Franken is currently working on his fourth book, Oh, The Things I Know! (Dutton), due to be released in May 2002.

I’m going to use this as an opportunity to vent against something that happened about six years ago: the rescinding of something called fin-syn. Fin-syn, financial interest and syndication rules, used to prevent networks from owning more than a certain percentage of the shows they aired. For years the networks argued that they needed to own their shows in order to be profitable. Fin-syn proponents argued that if the networks were allowed to have a stake in their shows, they would abuse their power, strongarming producers and giving favorable treatment to shows they had a financial interest in.

In 1995 the networks prevailed after years of fierce lobbying before Congress. And immediately the abuse began. At an American Bar Association dinner in 1997 I sat next to FTC Chairman Robert Pitofsky and asked him if he was aware that the networks were doing exactly what they testified they wouldn’t do. He asked, “What did they say they wouldn’t do?”

“Oh, they said stuff like, ‘We’d never favor our own shows. That’d be insane. We need to put the best shows on in order to get ratings.’”

“Oh yeah,” said Pitofsky, “now I remember.” Then he surprised me. Turns out Pitofsky had represented NBC during its lobbying effort. He had been one of the people saying those things. Now he wanted to know what was happening.

What was happening was that the networks were extorting studios and independents. Give us a piece of your show, or we won’t air it. Give us a bigger piece and we’ll give you a better time slot. They went very quickly from doing it secretly to doing it right out in the open. After all, if you’re the buyer and seller of programming, it would practically be corporate malpractice not to exploit your position. The studios and independents resisted at first on principle, then caved.

Who cares? If you watch network television, you should. The same people who are scheduling the shows are making the shows, so what you see reflects the tastes of fewer and fewer people. Maybe you’ve noticed.

And, of course, the rescinding of fin-syn actually made this chart possible. Studios not only could buy networks, they essentially had to buy them in self-defense. Disney, Fox Studios and Paramount (Viacom) don’t have to compete with...
ABC, Fox and CBS. They are ABC, Fox and CBS.

The sad thing is all the members of Congress who were lied to during the fight over fin-syn. For some reason, it doesn’t seem to bother them. I don’t know. Maybe they want to make sure they can get on TV.

Ani DiFranco

Ani DiFranco is a singer, songwriter, guitarist and founder of the Buffalo, New York–based independent label Righteous Babe Records. Her latest album is the two-disc set Revelling/Reckoning.

For the longest time my only mainstream media coverage was the occasional local daily preview of an upcoming performance or, even more rarely, a local album review. Features were very few and far between because I had no major-label backing (read: corporate backing), and they were always the impetus of a genuine ally: a like-minded reporter with an ear to the underground. But by and large, I remember that back in the day, one story dominated Joe Newspaper’s portrayal of me as I put-putted through town with my feminist songs and my incessant smile: I was an angry, angry girl.

My problem with the mainstream media is a personal one. They generally ignored me for seven years (save for the reactionary sexist stereotyping) until my audience was too big to ignore, and then finally, about five years ago, I sprang full-grown from the major media brow as the next great indie phenomenon.

“How did she get here without us?” the corporate media monolith asked itself. “Why, it must be her business savvy,” it answered.

Of course, we all know that in the political arena, anti-corporate sentiment is the first casualty of the corporate-controlled media. But what of the remaining fodder available to us? What about the dumb, easy stuff like music criticism or celebrity interviews? Where does the capitalist agenda end and personal interest begin? I don’t rightly know, but I have a personal interest in the intersection of culture, capitalism and media, because I am often standing at that crossroads with my guitar.

It’s daunting to have a force much bigger than yourself mis-shaping opinion about you at every turn, but it’s also instructive. I have learned the hard way about the fallacy of objectivity. Even a Q&A can be a funhouse mirror, as I have learned from one oversimplified, paraphrased, out-of-context interview after another: If you’re not asking the right questions, there are no right answers.

Ever a slave to my mother’s smile-and-be-sweet upbringing, I spent years trying to assimilate myself to the interviewers’ culture long enough to answer their questions politely. And for years I was left feeling compromised and icy. For example, a semirhetorical icebreaker such as, “So, you’re on tour supporting your new record?” could stun me at the outset. “Uh…yeah,” I replied, until I developed the courage and composure to say things like, “Well, no. I am on tour…because that’s my job as a working musician. In contrast to the commonplace industry model of: make an album then go on tour to sell the album, I do not play live music for the purpose of marketing a commodity. I see touring as an end in itself, as all folksingers do. Live performance is activism, exorcism and music school for me. Albums are peripheral. In fact, the scheduling of my touring itineraries and my periodic documenting of songs on albums is so disconnected that I have repeatedly found myself touring right up to album release and then taking an un-strategic but much-needed vacation.”

You can see how this could make for some cumbersome conversations. Try this one on for size: “How is your life different now that you are successful?” A simple question, right? I answered it straight a few times, before a light went off in my head that helped illuminate why it made me so uncomfortable.

“What do you mean by ‘success’?” I replied on that day. “The fact that I am appearing in your magazine? Because I think I was successful when I was 19 years old and could sell twenty tapes in one night to an audience of fifty people. I was successful when I quit my last day job at age 21 and supported myself through music without starving. I felt successful when I would show up at some student-union cafeteria, stand under the fluorescent lights and give people songs that would make them cry and stomp their feet and laugh out loud. In fact, it was the very idea that neither fame nor fortune could make you a success in life, but something deeper, that gave me the patience to remain independent all those hard years and not reach for the corporate carrot.”

I have spent too much of my life accommodating the (often subtle) sexist or capitalist subtext of my dialogue with the mainstream media. I’ve since grown the will to amend that situation, but damn—if I think outside the box, does it mean that I have to spend my fifteen minutes pointing at the box? For a girl whose very nature compels her to speed headlong into a world of her own invention, these arduous attempts at questioning the question can feel like so many wheels spinning.

When writer and subject share an ideological or cultural perspective, the conversations can begin to stretch and sing in a way that is indigenous to the subject. Otherwise, most of the movement in an interview can feel like a slow, jostling journey to square one.

Engaging the major media sources and entering into hand-to-hand combat with my stereotype has had its effect, though, I must say. Twelve years and fifteen albums have gone by, and I’ve noted an improvement in the terms of the discussions and the level of understanding that surrounds little me and my work. My optimist’s heart insists that I am not an aberration, either, but an example of the possibilities that exist for radical subculture to trickle into the mainstream.

Even in this age of corporate mega-mergers and media hegemony I have to believe that slowly…slowly…the truth will out.

Phil Donahue

Phil Donahue’s early career included both radio and television journalism experience. The Phil Donahue Show, which he founded in 1967, was the first audience-participation talk show in American history.

In 1959 I worked for WABJ in Adrian, Michigan. “The Voice of Lenawee County” was the proverbial small-wattage station in the Midwest, a dead-end place unless you were young and fearless enough to use it as a gateway to bigger things. When I was twenty-something I reported more than the weather on WABJ. I announced PTA and Rotary Club meetings, births at Bixby...
Hospital and the daily death report from the coroner’s office. I reported the local news of the day in southeast Michigan.

The Big Ten foldout chart in this issue of *The Nation* reveals the aftermath of the orgy of corporate cannibalism that has consumed the US broadcasting/entertainment industries since my barely noticed departure from Adrian.

It was the Adrian experience that turned me on to journalism. I was impressed with my own power—I could stop the mayor cold in his tracks just by approaching him with a microphone attached to a cumbersome Norelco tape recorder equipped with the vacuum tubes of yesteryear and a highly visible WABJ attached to the microphone. I also experienced the joy of being thrown out of an office. I had asked an unwelcome question and was promptly escorted to the door by an Adrian city commissioner. I played softball on the Police Department team, covered my first murder in nearby Hillsdale. The excitement and power of broadcast journalism were alive and well at this 250-watter in Smalltown, Michigan.

Until the 1980s one company could legally own no more than seven AM and seven FM stations. In 2001, one company, Clear Channel, owns more than 1,200. Profit at many stations is promoted by stripping staff to the bone; some of these places have barely any employees and no local programming. They are computerized corporate jukeboxes, reverse ATM machines. Their broadcast day is filled with the canned and the bland, a puree of yesteryear and a highly visible WABJ attached to the microphone. I also experienced the joy of being thrown out of an office. I had asked an unwelcome question and was promptly escorted to the door by an Adrian city commissioner. I played softball on the Police Department team, covered my first murder in nearby Hillsdale. The excitement and power of broadcast journalism were alive and well at this 250-watter in Smalltown, Michigan.

Nothing but digital music, commercials and profit.

The radio of my youth, the place where we learned of the goings-on about town, the life stuff of a small community, is now a quaint memory replaced by computer hard drives that operate twenty-four hours, seven days without the touch of a human hand. These robotic installations also function without any pretense of “serving the public interest,” the long-forgotten mandate of the FCC. The Happy Days AM radio of the 1950s may have sounded like wall-to-wall Teresa Brewer, but at least a live person spoke with us between records, and my own drive-in, sock-hop crowd got a dose of the real world during hourly newscasts.

The brokers of America’s AM and FM stations argue that the reality of economics in today’s radio market mandates consolidation. Nonsense: Consolidation is mandated by the greed of the broadcast lobby. Speaking of mandates, we once believed that broadcasting was a concept, pure free-marketism reached a high-water mark in January 1995. That was when the new Republican majority assumed control of the House of Representatives, Newt Gingrich was elected its Speaker and the technology-and-finance boom got under way in earnest.

The financial boom chugged ahead for several more years, but the romance of laissez-faire began to run into complications. The international version of this theory—“unregulated markets and increased global trade will bring democracy and harmony”—didn’t fit realities in Eastern Europe, in Southeast Asia, at World Trade Organization meetings or in much of the Islamic world.

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**Danny Goldberg**

Danny Goldberg is the CEO and co-owner of the independent music company Artemis Records.

When I look at the vast web of companies clustered in gigantic international media corporations, I imagine hundreds of nervous division managers worrying about the next quarter’s profits, which are the main driver of share price, which is the primary “report card” for CEOs. An enormous proportion of the energy of most of the smartest people at these places is thus focused on an arc of ninety days or less.

Short-term thinking is not, in itself, necessarily bad for aesthetics and culture. Without such earnings pressure it seems unlikely that a group of white, middle-aged music executives would have empowered and enriched inner-city African-Americans in the rap business, producing music that is so reviled by the intellectual and political establishments. The fact that the radical political rock band Rage Against the Machine has recorded for Sony Music for its entire career further illustrates the quirkiness of the modern media corporation.

On the other hand, to have so little intellectual capital devoted to thinking years instead of months in advance creates weird distortions. Many forms of creativity are stifled or crushed in such environments. Brilliant artists with passionate audiences are cast adrift.

On the bright side, despite enormous efforts at consolidation, “independents” still have a 15–20 percent market share in the music business. Reactionaries, knaves and fools show up at indie companies as regularly as big ones, but independence does provide a more fertile environment for longer-term thinking and edgy creativity. It is no accident that rap as well as innovative rock artists such as Nirvana started on indies, nor that Ani DiFranco remains one. The rest of the media would be a lot healthier if they had equally large independent sectors, but the only way that will happen is if individuals, inspired by original and effective mavericks such as Michael Moore and Danny Schechter, take the wild and scary risk of working crazy hours against all odds and operate their own underfunded, fragile new endeavors.

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**James Fallows**

James Fallows, the national correspondent of *The Atlantic Monthly*, published *Breaking the News* in 1996.

As a concept, pure free-marketism reached a high-water mark in January 1995. That was when the new Republican majority assumed control of the House of Representatives, Newt Gingrich was elected its Speaker and the technology-and-finance boom got under way in earnest.

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Guardian (UK)

New York City

www.guardian.co.uk posts updates every ten minutes to its World Latest section, supplies topt-

I.E.AMERICARADIO

Moab, Mo.

I.E.Americaradio.com and its syndicated talk-

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KPPA broadcasts KSIPP's radio programming into a broad range of social issues. It is fresh, fast-moving and colorful, with world-wide coverage based on "take it or leave it—you make up your own mind." The show presents the listener with "the other side of the coin (or the con)"!

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The Nation.

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Austin, Tex.

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Scottsdale, Ariz.

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LIPPER

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-2.83%

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Parnassus vs. Competitor

Total Returns from 3/31/98 through 9/30/01

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| Past performance is no guarantee of future
|          | 26%       | 34%         | 44%           | 53%       |
| Return on NAV  | 26%       | 34%         | 44%           | 53%       |

We were also the #1 equity income fund for the past three years.* If you like your investment philosophy and want solid performance including a yield from dividend-paying stocks, we would like to have you as a shareholder. When you call, ask for a prospectus which contains more complete information including management fees and expenses. Review this material carefully before investing. You can also ask for a semianual report. People tell us that our shareholder reports are the best in the mutual fund industry.

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ENVIRONMENT HAWAI‘I

West Hartford, Conn.

Environment Hawai‘i is researched, written and published monthly by Patricia Tummons from Kona, Hawaii (www.environment-hawaii.org). It investigates zoning, despoilment, natural resources, federal, state and local policy and all manner of important issues relating to the fragile ecosystem of Hawaii, and the world. This muckraking newsletter is informative (and often horrifying). CRICKET MUEGEL

FREE RADIO SANTA CRUZ

Santa Cruz, Calif.

Free Radio Santa Cruz (96.3 FM) brings us voices and news we rarely hear elsewhere. This uncensored station is a beacon of independent media hope and the sea of media conglomerations and managed news. This all-volunteer archivist collective shows how local citizens can intervene and improve our communities. It can be heard at http://members.cruzo.com/~free

GREENBIZ

Charleston, S.C.

GreenBiz (http://greenbiz.com) addresses consumer and business issues related to the environment in an approachable and readable ethicality. By including current topics that range from “Bothered in Your Backyard?” to articles on the air, water and pollution of all types, this website provides deals with public health and the health of our planet. ELAINE J. ASHIELA

GUARDIAN (UK)

New York City

www.guardian.co.uk posts updates every ten minutes to its World Latest section, supplies top-notch coverage and a relatively objective analysis. I read things there that I don’t hear about from US news sources for days, if ever. Its Weblog is a fantastic guide to websites and articles, and in Special Report is check-full of user-generated information. CAROLINE HOBGEN

1. AMERICA-RADIO

Moaberry, Mo.

Moaberry.com and its syndicated talk-show hosts Mike Malloy and Peter Werbe report beyond what the corporations and the right wing want citizens to hear. It is beyond refreshing to hear talk-radio not filled with right-wing propaganda purveying hatred and lies to mindless worshipers. JOHN L. WEANT

THE INDEPENDENT

Colorado Springs

The Colorado Springs Independent is a breath of fresh, independent Rocky Mountain air. It rigorously cattogized for telling us what the daily Gazette will not—about rapacious developers out to price these priceless open spaces, about bigotry against gays and other minorities, the corruption of public officials, unequal opportuni-ties (www.sandy.com). BARBARA MARTIN

INDYMEDIA

Portland, Ore.

Indymedia.org covers local and national news as posted by its readers. “If you don’t like the media, become the media!” ANNE OLSEN

IN THESE TIMES

Cambridge, Mass.

It was first turned on to radical politics by In These Times magazine when I was 15. Ever since then, it has given me analysis and reports from the front that have kept me apprased of the world’s hidden history and of the real forces shaping today’s politics. BEN WHEELER

JEWISH PEACE NEWS

Santa Cruz, Calif.

I subscribe to the daily bulletins from the Jew-ish Peace News, a listserver of the Jewish Voice for Peace in San Francisco (JewishPeace@yahoogroups.com, or info@jewishvoiceforpeace.com). Their scope and excellent selectivity on Israel and the occupied territories and related topics ranges through Haaretz, the Jerusalem Post, Al Jazeera, Agence France-Presse, the Wall Street Journal, The Independent, The Nation and many other sources. Each item is preceded by a fact and very witty pre-cis. From below:*11 JPN was an improbable in-teresting and countering the official US line. Since 2001 it feels inadmissible. AMERIHE RUBIN

KOOP

Austin, Tex.

KOPP radio 91.7 is the only community-owned, community-managed radio outlet in the area. All the programmers are volunteers, their entire budget is less than the salary of most program directors. They have local news and public affairs programming such as Radical Mothers’ Voice, Native Horizons and Left in the Dark. Its half-hour weekly drive-time news program focuses on progressive issues both local and international. KOOP also provides a forum for local grassroots groups and charitable organizations. GERALD M. THOMAS

KPFK

Sacramento, Calif.

I nominate Berkeley’s KPFK-radio the orig-inal and now truly independent Pacifica sta-tion (www.kpfk.org). The cabal at Pacifica has been forced to try to remake the network into a noisy, listening chanal and leave the progressives in the Bay Area. LA, Houston, Washington and Nantucket York with no outlet. SCOTT JOHNSON

LA LUTTA

Sacramento, Calif.

La Lutta New Media Collective is one of the nation’s most informative, investigative and cut-ting-edge media sources. I’ve watched La Lutta develop from a small labor of love to a thriving site that mixes politics with art, organizing with culture and—most important—the voice of the people with news reporting. I turn to the La Lutta Daily for the stories of struggle that don’t make it into the larger progressive news sites—news from the pocket lines, short stories and town-hall meetings, it’s the movement’s bulletin boards. Thousands of us around the world have bookmarked La Lutta (www.lalutta.org).

ELIZABETH KNIGHT

LEFT BUSINESS OBSERVER

Pennsylvania, Pa.

Left Business Observer, Doug Hendrix’s too much too frequent and sometimes economically published newsletter, provides an essential dissec-tion of the latest machinations of our manip-ulated economy. By providing real world macro- and micro-economic data, LBO substitutes practical science and trenchant criticism for rank speculation and opinion. LBO provides all the ammunition I need for intellectual self-defense in a world of neoliberal, monopoly, consumer capitalism.

LOWDOWN

Olympia, Wash.

One of my favorite publications is Jim Hightower’s Lowdown. He is an advocate, for populism. Hightower has energy and intelligence, experience and wisdom. He searches subjects others ignore, and he is funny. Sometimes humor is the best means of commu-nication. IRENE M. BERTIN

MEDIACHANNEL.ORG

Chico, Calif.

Mediachannel.org is my personal number-one news portal. Every day, it provides me with thought-provoking, substantive commentary on breaking news, detailed and critical analysis, plus links to thousands of newspapers throughout the world. It has a firm grasp on how good reporting can inform the public, what freedom of the press means really—and their hearts are in the right place. BARBARA FLAUS

MERIA

Savannah, Ga.

www.meria.net presents the news and infor-mation that corporate-owned media won’t. It is fresh, fast-moving and colorful, with worldwide coverage based on “take it or leave it—you make up your own mind.” The show presents the listener with “the other side of the coin (or the con)!”

NEW DIMENSIONS

Ukiah, Calif.

New Dimensions Broadcasting Network presents a breadth and depth of socially con-scious programming on public radio and the Internet (www.newdimensions.org), second to none. Their widely acclaimed, award-winning flagship radio series, New Dimensions, a one-hour in-depth exploration of ideas through dia-logues is known to listen to. It is heard on radio sta-tions nationwide and is hosted by Michael Toms. Acknowledged as one of the best overseers of new dimensions in media today. REBECCA KAGAYA
The Big Ten

AT&T CORPORATION

Radio

Quincy Jones Entertainment Co. (12.5% w/75% AT&T and 5% Quincy Jones)

Music

Other

WB (10% w/71% AT&T), 23 Tribune Co. and 11 Warner Bros., HBO and Cinema, (17% w/70% AT&T), Comedy Central (27% w/55% AT&T and 10% Viacom), Court TV (37.5% w/21.2% AT&T and 50% Literary), E! Style and Style (7.5% w/AT&T, Liberty, Court Channel, CNN, TNT, Cartoon Network, Turner Classic Movies, CNN, CNN International and CNN/Fox Sports [Rutledge]), TVG (75% w/AT&T), Music Choice (w/AT&T and Irish; AT&T) and others; wholly and partially owned networks in Asia, Europe and South America.

INTERNET

America Online, Compuserve, Netscape, ICQ and AOL Instant Messenger, websites include MusicNet (50% w/20% Bertamens, 25% w/RealNetworks), digital films, music, napster and music sites Spincore, Winamp and SMRTFis, stakes in Amazon.com (21% Dr. Knop), (25% w/20% Bertamens, 25% w/RealNetworks), digital content and Advance-Nextoehoe.

SPORTS

Atlanta Braves, Atlanta Hawks, Atlanta Thrashers, Goodwill Games, Phillips Arena

INTERNET

PRIVATE 101 magazines including American Baby, Modern Bride, Seventeen, (2.5% w/87.5% Bertamens, 25% w/RealNetworks), digital films, music, napster and music sites Spincore, Winamp and SMRTFis, stakes in Amazon.com (21% Dr. Knop), (25% w/20% Bertamens, 25% w/RealNetworks), digital content and Advance-Nextoehoe.

OTHER

Spirit (21%), Mollerla (19%), calling cards, long-distance, voice service via cable, hd in cable and onereport (8%); stakes in all wireless and telecommunication providers in Japan, Central and South America, and throughout Europe. Telekabel Austria (25% w/10% Liberty and Barry Diller), Astra Reit A Car (30%), Coldbrain Verl (5%) and Cimetea 21 (7.5% Liberty); Arctic Corporation (13%); women's make-up/broadband network products; The Nature Company Stores and Discovery Communications and Propagation (25% w/50% AOL-TW, 5% News Corp.), court television (12.5% w/37.5% AOL-TW and 50% Quincy Jones)

SPORTS

Demper Nuggets, Colorado Avalanche, Pepsi Center in Denver (25% w/5% Stan Kroenke)
TELEVISION
Networks
Discovery and The Learning Channel (51% w/Discovery); Animal Planet, National Geographic Channel (51% w/Discovery); Animal Planet en español, Animal Planet (51% w/Discovery); DIS Network (51% w/Discovery); National Geographic Channel (51% w/Discovery); Animal Planet (51% w/Discovery); Discovery Science Channel (51% w/Discovery).

WALT DISNEY COMPANY
Networks
Disney Channel, ESPN, ABC, Disney/Telepictures Corp., Sci-Fi Channel, Cartoon Network, Adult Swim, Toon Disney, Disney Jr., Disney Channel (51% w/Discovery), Disney/ABC Television Group (51% w/Discovery).

THEME PARKS/
LIVE VENUE
Paramount has theme parks in the US and Canada; Star: The Experience at the Las Vegas Hilton; SeaWorld in Orlando, Florida; Busch Gardens Richmond; SeaWorld San Antonio (51% w/Discovery); SeaWorld Orlando (51% w/Discovery); SeaWorld San Diego (50% w/Discovery).

MAGAZINES
US Weekly (51% w/Weekly Reader Media), Discover, Family Fun, Disney Adventure, First for the Family (50% w/Discovery), E! (50% w/Discovery).

RESORTS/THEMED VENUES

BOOKS

RADIO
ESPN Radio (80% w/20% Hearst), ESPN Radio, ESPN Radio, ESPN Radio (80% w/20% Hearst)

OTHER
Tea-the productions of Beauty and the Beast, The Lion King, The Hangover, of Notre Dame and Oslo, New Amsterdam Theatre on Broadway, 741 stations and Disney database; catalogues; licences for clothes, toys, and for teaching aids; videofilms for schools; stocks in sites including NFL.com and Movies.com (includes a 4,900-site box); markets sell from Disney animated films; Celebration, Florida, a 4,900-acre town.

INTERNET
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NEW HAMPSHIRE GAZETTE
Portsmouth, N.H.
Your New Hampshire Gazette has a unique view on local, national and international events, provides much-needed balance and has an excellent memory. While large media outlets seem to remember only twenty minutes back, the Gazette draws on hundreds of years of experience. It is the nation's oldest newspaper (begun twenty years before this nation was born) and still possesses the spirit and sharp penmanship it did 245 years ago. Finely tuned satire and caricature are its weapons of choice. The Gazette knows a good laugh is more powerful than a violent strike.

BOBBY LANGREK
Portsmouth, N.H.
I have never run into anything like the New Hampshire Gazette. It is refreshing and bizarre. Its lean is nearly vertical.

CHANGES NEEDED
New York City
As an unaligned, university-related, noncommercial website, is a cleaning-house for links to places to find understanding and humor about current events. And its database site, www.progressivemajority.org.

WORLD WAR 4
The Onion
Los Angeles
It offers global perspective and Midwestern reality, you can't beat NyaGard Notes, an e-mail newsletter, the slice of the onion. Jeff Nygaard has a knack for taking mainstream media's logic and standing it on its head. He covers the contradictions of modernity implied in the war in Afghanistan? Read The Onion. Want to change your neighbor's mind about the war? Read NyaGard Notes.

JEFFREY RAYRO

THE ONION
Los Angeles
The Onion (www.theonion.com) manages to walk the line between absurdity and absurd reality, making fun of some of the best satire there is. It also deftly parodies our dumbed-down media. Take the following headlines, for example: "Bush Executes 253 New Mexico Democrats: Retakes State's Five Electoral Votes"; "CIA Admits It's Good at Overthrowing Stuff, Not So Much the Intelligence." Yes!

THE SPLEEN
Chicago
The Splen is an irreplaceable, irrefutable source of information I couldn't find anywhere else. From reports on the Nader campaign to in-depth accounts of the gem and drug trade in Southeast Asia, the site always provides fresh angles and critical thinking.

JACOB KAUS

THE OTHER SIDE
Easthampton, Mass.
The Other Side (300 W. Appsley St., Philadelphia, PA 19114), an evangelical Christian magazine, which, unlike most such, is ecumenical, progressive, producer-proponent, pro-people, prophet, proconsumer, propeople—as opposed to proNATAs (www.theonathens.org).

R.M. DREGER

WASHINGTON FREE PRESS
Seattle
The Washington Free Press, a Seattle-based progressive community newspaper, has had stories in Project Censored's top twenty-five stories in three out of the past five years. It frequently carries topics and issues of wide import that get into the mainstream papers months or years later. It's grassroots journalism with an ear to the ground.

KARL SCHEER

WASHINGTHON SPACTOR
New York City
I enjoy The Washington Spectator (1000 First St. NE, Washington, D.C. 20002, New York, NY 10011), a sharply focused one-page newsletter published by The Public Concern Foundation. Each issue concentrates on a single political story, from a witty, progressive point of view, with a summary of other Washington foolishness, slugged "FYL" which often reminds me of The Nation's "News of the Week in Reviews." Good stuff.

TOM DYKINS

WF MU
Brooklyn, N.Y.
It is refreshing and bizarre. Its slant is nearly vertical. CHARLES STANNARD

WHOSEFLORID A
Tallahassee
www.whoseflorida.com was established about a year ago as a grassroots effort in response to Jeb Bush's initiatives to dismantle and privatize state government, to give the developers free rein, give tax breaks to the wealthy and essentially to turn as much of the state revenue over to the corporate interests as possible. This newsletter is documenting and archiving the effects of these actions and making it possible to anyone looking for a sale of the Florida state largely ignored by the media. BRAD BENNETT HOFFMAN

WLFU-FM radius
Chicago
WLUW-FM radio, Loyola University's station, mixes great independent music, interesting issue-oriented programming, including some syndicated programs from a refreshing liberal point of view, and a variety of community-oriented programming. "WLUW is a real hip jukebox, a great alternative newspaper and a center for diverse cultures within this city." (www.wluw.org). MIKE BENNETT

YES!
Berkeley, Calif.
I recommend Io! magazine, the quarterly journal of the Positive Futures Network. Each issue focuses on a single theme, like "Working for Life;" "Reclaiming the Commons;" "Technology, Who Chooses?" Its in-depth coverage focuses on people who believe that a more life-affirming world is possible and what they are doing to achieve it. Inspired by Io!, I've quit full-time employment, pursued a vocation in sustainable architecture and installed photovoltaic panels on my roof.

PAUL CHANG

ZMIAG
Hopewell Borough, N.J.
Like a breath of spring air, I discovered zmag.org after September 11. I was looking for something different. Here is a publication that delivers fresh, provocative journalism. When everyone agrees with everyone, it's a dangerous time to be an American.

JEAN HARRINGTON
Later. It's grassroots journalism with an ear to
The Nation.

January 7/14, 2002

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The domestic-policy version—“Let’s forget about regulations and safety nets, since the new economy has eliminated the business cycle”—has had its own problems: the NASDAQ collapse, the California energy disaster and the Enron shell-game, the sudden rise in unemployment and the dramatic shift of the federal budget from surplus to deficit. Newt Gingrich was gone as the symbol of the Republican’s rise to glory, replaced by a man who at least campaigned as a “compassionate” conservative. And these past few months, no politician has pushed the atomized, Ayn Rand-style vision of ideal social life.

What is left, as a kind of geologic artifact of that bygone era, is the radical free-marketism of policy toward the media. Until the 1990s, the idea had been that news organizations in particular, and the communications business in general, were logically

In the past, at the urging of companies like AOL Time Warner and Hearst, the USPS has granted discounts for things like sorting by ZIP code and trucking to particular mailing locations. On paper these discounts are available to all periodicals, but in reality they are profitable mainly for publications that can benefit from economies of scale. The most vulnerable are excluded from the savings. (As a result, it’s cheaper on a pro-rata basis to mail big, heavy, advertising-saturated magazines like Vogue and Cosmopolitan than to mail thin, light, ad-free magazines like In These Times or Extra!)

This year, however, for the first time, independent periodicals may enjoy modest but real representation in the byzantine process of postal-rate-setting. Under the leadership of John Anner, the Independent Press Association (IPA), which represents 350 periodicals including The Nation (we are one of its largest members; most are nonprofits with circulation under 10,000), has hired counsel and is putting together a federation that will fight for the little guy.

None of this is to suggest that the USPS does not have its problems. As a result of rising labor costs, rival delivery systems like FedEx and its own inefficiencies, the service’s annual losses in the budget year ending September 30 were estimated at $1.7 billion. And that’s not counting September 11 and anthrax, which could cost the postal system well over $1 billion. Nevertheless, as our own Robert Sherrill has pointed out in the past, the postal subsidy, whatever it turns out to be, “is hardly a drain” when compared with agricultural and military subsidies.

The challenge the IPA faces is to make a politics out of what in the past has been an invisible issue—the right of the public to have access to ideas, perspectives, information, analysis and literature omitted from the mass media. Organizations like the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses, the National Newspaper Association, the National Association of Hispanic Publications, the Independent Labor Communications Association, the Coalition of Religious Press Associations and others should all join IPA’s federation.

Here is a chance not merely to fight rate increases that discriminate against independent and alternative journals and journalism but to introduce some democratic sense into the process. For example, the principle of postal subsidies is already in play. Because the USPS retains the discretion to propose the allocation of costs within each class, every time a new postal increase is recommended a bruising behind-the-scenes battle ensues, as numerous interested groups make their case before an obscure agency called the Postal Rate Commission, which receives tons of paper and eons of testimony and after many months makes recommendations to the Board of Governors (presidential appointees all) of the USPS.

Traditionally, small-circulation magazines, especially journals of opinion, literary magazines, scholarly journals and such, have been underrepresented in these bureaucratic skirmishes. This is partly because they can’t afford the high-priced lobbyists and lawyers required for effective representation, but also because the Magazine Publishers Association (MPA), which one would expect to represent all citizens in the republic of magazines, is dominated by the major players and over the years has protected their interests, often to the detriment of their small- and tiny-circulation brethren. Since these smaller periodicals are for the most part financially marginal and money-losing operations, the amount of a postal-rate increase can often make the difference between survival and disappearance.

In recent times, postal rates have been increased on average three years. But having already hiked its rates in 2000, the USPS raised rates twice in 2001 and is now asking for a further increase of 10 percent—an increase that could cost The Nation well into the six figures. Rumor is rife that the MPA wants to “settle” the case in a way that could be prejudicial to the economics of magazines with smaller circulations, less advertising and more editorial content.
similar to transportation, higher education and medical care. In fields like these, private enterprises did most of the work, often as profit-making businesses. But the broad social effects of such businesses were so great that the standards and service were not left wholly to the market. An airline couldn’t decide to fly defective planes for lower fares and let the market reveal its risk preference. (As it turned out, airlines did lowball their security-screener contracts, which illustrates the point.)

The Nation’s chart shows the result of letting the communications business operate strictly as a business. With the end of limits on concentration and chain ownership, the media biz has sorted out into a few big conglomerates, as has happened in the automobile and apparel industries. The Gap is allied with Old Navy and Banana Republic; similarly, CNN touts stories from Time publications, with links on the AOL home page. The idea of the mid-1990s has been discredited; its effects live on.

Nancy Kranich

Nancy Kranich is the immediate past president of the American Library Association and was formerly associate dean of libraries at New York University.

Within hours of the terrorist attacks on September 11, people rushed to libraries and cleared the shelves of materials about the Taliban, Islam, Afghanistan and terrorism. The most obscure books on these topics had close to 100 holds pending at just one small branch library in downtown Manhattan. Most remarkable, few of these titles were produced by any of the Big Ten media corporations. In fact, most were published by university presses, the federal government or small independents. During such a crisis, the public sought background materials, not best-sellers, to foster understanding and cope with this horrific event by leaning on a trustworthy, reliable source—the library.

Democracy needs not only an abundance but also a diversity of information to thrive, particularly when facing economic and security crises. Public discourse during this time of trial depends upon sources outside the mainstream—sources unlikely to return the level of profit needed to satisfy the mass-market strategies of multinational conglomerates.

The Nation’s 2001 “Big Ten” chart dramatizes the extent of media consolidation and conglomeration, but it does not depict all the ways in which the public is denied access to information essential to global understanding, economic well-being and participation in democratic processes. Organizations supporting the production of specialized information—organizations like libraries—are among the first cut in an economic downturn. When library budgets get slashed, small media companies suffer most. Without the market created by libraries, these independent and scholarly producers face downsizing or even extinction.

The spiral of declining library budgets and disappearing small-media producers carries with it more than the loss of esoteric titles. Democracy itself suffers. The debates yet to come—on the Taliban, on Afghanistan, on terrorism and on any new order to emerge—will thrive or founder on the quality of the ideas brought into the arena. As fewer conglomerates dominate the mainstream media market, we cannot assume that libraries will be able to continue offering alternatives. Robust public debate depends upon the survival and symbiosis of libraries with small-media producers. Without the ideas from these sources, public discourse will languish in conventionality and ignorance.

Julianne Malveaux

Julianne Malveaux (www.juliannemalveaux.com) is a Washington, DC–based economist and syndicated columnist. Her most recent book, Wall Street, Main Street and the Side Street: A Mad Economist Takes a Stroll (Pines One), is a collection of her columns.

How do the independent media survive and maintain integrity in light of massive agglomeration? Some don’t—Ms. magazine was recently sold to a nonprofit organization that can absorb losses in a way that the magazine couldn’t. When I look at the chart I see a concentration of media power, a seamless connection between radio, television, newspapers, books, the Internet, movies and magazines in a manner that bolsters a corporate position and squelches a diversity of voices.

When I say diversity, I don’t mean race, ethnicity or class—though those things very much matter. I speak of a diversity in view and vision, something that becomes increasingly important as the current climate encourages a patriotic hegemony and discourages honest dissent with the President, whether it is about his war tactics or economic stimulus. The rush to uniform thinking has muted the voices of many who oppose corporate giveaways such as repeal of the alternative minimum tax, while making those who express their opinion especially vulnerable to attack. In his December 8 radio address, criticizing the Senate for not passing the House’s corporation-favoring stimulus package, President Bush said, “Now is not the time for partisan politics. Now is the time for leadership. It’s time to act.” But the Senate should not act on a proposal that includes billions in corporate giveaways. Instead, it should offer a stimulus package targeted to those who have felt the brunt of recession. In our living rooms and at our lunch tables, Americans are talking about stimulus, about public-works possibilities and about other ways those at the bottom can get a break. In the media, though, such voices aren’t heard.

When “the media” reflect a corporate bottom line, the breadth and depth of coverage suffer. Three decades ago, there were labor reporters in the United States—people who covered a comprehensive labor beat. They weren’t “general interest” economic reporters who wrote one or two pieces a year on an AFL-CIO convention; they knew the players and understood the issues. Today, one in seven workers belongs to a union, but labor reporters are few and far between. So are consumer-affairs reporters, the ones who can spend half a year busting a predatory retailer. And so are foreign correspondents, even though they may be experiencing little unemployment in the wake of 9/11. None of us should be surprised at the trend toward quick and dirty news, low-cost, talking-head-driven programming. When a media outlet is a cog in a wheel that must help maximize corporate profits, not part of an information-gathering entity, then containing costs, not providing information, is a priority.

The current organization of the nation’s media increases my respect and appreciation for independent voices that struggle
to put diverse views out there, people like Farai Chideya at popandpolitics.com, Don Rojas at The Black World Today, The Progressive, The Nation and others who are passionate about their need to get the word out there independently.

Danny Schechter


Ownership charts are at once a sign of the times and the sign that points to who controls the ways we understand our times. They are welcome, but as road maps to relationships that need fleshing out. In the real world, these entities function like amoebas, intersecting and collaborating with their competitors. It is their cumulative impact in framing issues and filtering out opinions that challenge their worldview that is more insidious. As Benjimen Barber of the Democracy Collaborative at the University of Maryland explains: “A year from now the mergers and alliances will have again shifted and some successful owners will be some other corporation’s prey. The players will not have changed, however, only the line score on their current game.”

How do ownership patterns affect journalism? Broadcasters were into cloning well before scientists. Board rooms don’t fax the newsroom—they don’t have to. The ideological uniformity and homogeneity of their multichannel environment is, in Marshall McLuhan’s phrase, “pervasively invisible.” The many channels and choices are more apparent to the public than the narrow range of voices. Newscasters say the world changed “forever” after September 11, but media haven’t changed all that much. Regular programming and commercials were briefly interrupted, but it was soon back to business. Coverage of the world has increased only because Washington is more engaged in certain parts of it. While there is certainly more “serious news” than in recent years, it is still largely marching in lockstep with government policies. A post-9/11 study by the Project for Excellence in Journalism notes that “while the news has gotten more serious, almost all of the change is focused on the war, which suggests that the networks may have simply changed subjects rather than changed their approach to the news.” Their sameness of approach and style is blatant; no wonder CBS and ABC are now considering joint newsgathering.

As a media maker as well as a critic, I can report that independent companies like ours are having a harder time than ever in this über-merged environment. That’s because most networks tend to produce in-house or acquire product from other divisions in their conglomerates. Our work is rarely rejected on grounds of irrelevance or incompetence. What we hear instead from both commercial outlets and commercializing public broadcasters is that critically edged work is “worthy” but NFU—“Not For Us.” When documentaries of a kind routinely aired elsewhere in the world become programas-non-grata, we have to recognize that we are up against a largely closed system (i.e., as represented by the chart’s colored boxes). Entertainment-oriented formats and formulas rule in a blatantly top-down, corporate-friendly climate, with little interest in dissenting ideas or bottom-up global reporting. This was always true; only it is getting worse.

You have to get outside the box to see what’s missing—other boxes offering diverse perspectives, or public-service channels about the environment (not just wildlife), labor issues and forums for citizen debate. They are missing not because the audience isn’t interested—most viewers blast major media whenever asked. No, it’s because the power concentrated in this maze has, over time, replaced democracy with its own self-referencing mediocrity.

Hussein Ibish

Hussein Ibish is communications director of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee.

By demonstrating the extraordinary concentration of media power in the hands of a few massive corporations, this chart goes a long way toward explaining the persistent pattern of distortions in both the news and entertainment industries and the dearth of alternative voices and ideas. This is, in fact, the schematic of what Adorno called “The Great Wurlitzer,” the loosely coordinated light and sound show that entertains and confounds the American public.

In terms of news coverage, it explains the homogeneity of the concerns and perspectives reflected in reportage and commentary, the exclusion of alternative perspectives and the propagation of a worldview determined by various forms of official rhetoric. Such power is jealously guarded against both domestic and international challenges, as demonstrated by the campaign of vilification against the Arabic-language news channel Al Jazeera, which rose to prominence during the bombing of Afghanistan. This attack on Al Jazeera culminated in the deliberate bombing of its Kabul headquarters by the US military in the hours before the Northern Alliance entered the city.

For Arab-Americans, this concentrated media power means an almost complete lack of interest or understanding on the part of major American news organizations of the experiences and concerns of the Arab peoples, and a general tone of condescension, hostility and bias. In its most egregious form, regarding the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, it means a persistent pattern of privileging Israeli lives, security and concerns over those of Palestinians, against whom unparalleled levels of racist vitriol from commentators is considered legitimate.

The key industries of American mass culture, Hollywood and television, for decades have been bastions of anti-Arab stereotyping, and have consistently resisted positive or realistic representations of Arabs and Arab-Americans. Negative representations in popular culture reinforce, and are reinforced by, hostile journalism, confrontational academic polemics and government policies that are informed by anti-Arab bias and at times even act out stereotypes received from popular culture.

The result is a self-perpetuating vicious circle of negativity about Arabs, Arab-Americans and Muslims, who have been all-too-successfully represented as “the enemy” in contemporary American culture. Such generalized negativity is what allowed so many Americans to conclude that the September 11 attacks were somehow representative of Arab culture and/or Islam, leading to a massive backlash of hate crimes and discrimination. The corporate monopoly on media power represented in this chart...
helps insure that such negative images dominate the popular culture and cannot be easily challenged by alternatives.

Nicholas Johnson

Nicholas Johnson, an FCC commissioner from 1966 to 1973, now teaches at the University of Iowa College of Law in Iowa City.

Some thirty-five years ago ITT’s attempted takeover of ABC provided my baptism into the sea of media-concentration issues. That case, including my lengthy dissents to the FCC’s approval, continued through my first year as FCC commissioner. An expanded discussion for The Atlantic Monthly, “The Media Barons and the Public Interest,” became a centerpiece of my book How to Talk Back to Your Television Set. Where I live the Big Ten is an athletic conference. The Nation’s “Big Ten” chart depicts far more serious stuff. What seemed evil and outrageous in the late 1960s now looks like America’s Golden Age of media diversity. Media concentration is a dagger in America’s heart—the First Amendment. There are at least four consequences:

First, there are fewer owners of dominant media. Fewer cities with meaningful competition. Fewer owners within each medium. Owners have ultimate control over content. So there’s potentially, and actually, less diversity of information and opinion.

Second, profit pressures produce a dumbing down of journalism. News junkies must turn to the Internet, foreign press and BBC. Product placement and program-length TV commercials used to violate FCC rules. No longer. We have twenty-four-hour shopping channels. The media choose content not to educate or inform but to pander to the consumers advertisers most desire.

Third, multimedia conglomerates are a publicist’s dream. Global hype of manufactured blockbusters and superheroes can, and does, replace diversity, quality and new talent. A single conglomerate can orchestrate subsidiaries from magazines to books, screenwriters, film studios, movie theaters, print and broadcast critics, television networks, videotape production and rental, new TV series, cable systems and program originators.

Finally, the Supreme Court considers such conglomerates the First Amendment equivalent of a soapbox orator or tract writer 200 years ago. The only Americans with meaningful First Amendment rights today are those who own the media; The Nation’s “Big Ten.”

Editors and journalists don’t have First Amendment rights. Freelance writers sure don’t. Unless you have billions in spare pocket change and buy one of the Big Ten for yourself, you’re out of the game. Silenced.

The Court says with a First Amendment right to speak goes the right to censor all others. It’s OK to own the only conduit in town and also censor its content.

Think about that for a moment—and then take another look at The Nation’s chart.

JOHN STOSSEL HAS HIGH Q-RATINGS, SO HE DOESN’T HAVE TO WORRY ABOUT THE RULES.

A Teflon Correspondent

All roles of journalists must be played by journalists (duh!). —David Westin, president of ABC News, discussing Leonardo DiCaprio’s interview of Bill Clinton

John Stossel, television’s million-dollar bonus baby, has given new meaning to the old journalistic maxim “Follow the money.” People who worked with him in the early 1980s at WCBS-TV in New York remember an easygoing, dedicated reporter who produced reliable though somewhat lightweight stories exposing a vast array of minor consumer frauds and business abuses. Ralph Nader liked him. “But that was when the ‘little guy’ was the zeitgeist,” a WCBS colleague recalls. “Now it’s big business.” And Stossel followed the zeitgeist, a move that has paid off handsomely for him and his current employer, ABC News.

Mark Dowie’s most recent book is American Foundations: An Investigative History (MIT Press). Research support was provided by the Investigative Fund of the Nation Institute.

In the early 1980s news was still a serious factor in television programming. Broadcast executives at diversified TV networks remembered and occasionally quoted William Paley’s legendary memo in which he said news was a public service that, if done right, was very difficult to make a profit on. No problem, said Paley (unchallenged at the time by corporate bean counters); the network would make back, through its entertainment division, any losses incurred by the news division.

But one by one, the three original networks were acquired by corporate owners with little if any interest in reliable news or public service. Entertainment was where the money was. By the mid-1980s broadcast executives were taking notice of minute-by-minute ratings and the large, seductive eyes of new “talent.” Network news divisions were designated as profit centers and news itself became a product, sold like everything else to Madison Avenue. Even so, news was still serious, most of it broadcast without background music, ubiquitous logos or crisis slogans.

When attention (“attracting eyeballs”) became the primary
goal of programming in the early 1990s, however, professional attention-grabbers like John McLaughlin, Howard Stern, Bill O’Reilly, Don Imus and Chris Matthews became free-market winners. By cleverly blending blue-collar social values with Wall Street economic values, they got rich. And a handsome young Princeton graduate, confused about his politics but certain of his ambition, followed their lead. He dropped the Naderite stories, became a hero of the libertarian right and got rich.

Steve Wilson, another of Stossel’s early WCBS colleagues, now an investigative reporter at WXYZ in Detroit, was surprised enough by Stossel’s rapid rise to stardom and his pro-corporate transformation to ask about it. “I ran into him one day, kidded him about his metamorphosis and asked what had happened,” Wilson recalls. “I got a little older,” John answered. ‘Liked the idea of making real money. So started looking at things a little differently.’"

Alarmed at his old friend’s sudden mutation, Wilson called another former WCBS reporter, Arnold Diaz, who had also moved over to ABC (though as a lowly consumer reporter, at a fraction of Stossel’s wage). “What happened to Stossel?” Wilson asked Diaz. Diaz was circumspect, as everyone at ABC is when discussing high-priced talent. “They let him go away with a lot here,” Wilson says Diaz answered. “But they don’t call him a journalist anymore.”

What Diaz said may be true internally, but for its viewers ABC still packages Stossel as a reporter—a dogged, take-no-prisoners investigator. But they allow him to play by a vastly different set of rules than mainline reporters like Tom Jarrell, Lynn Sherr, John Miller and Brian Ross, who are held to strict standards prescribed in a 100-page manual of professional and ethical practices compiled and distributed by former ABC News president Roone Arledge in 1994. Although Arledge is long gone, replaced by a lawyer with limited news experience, all employees are still required to read the manual and sign a form saying they’ve done so. By all indications, the standards are only invoked when the network needs an excuse to fire someone. Were they strictly enforced, John Stossel might also be long gone, as he appears to have violated them repeatedly. For example, the standards caution that “especially when there is controversy or accusation, give the person speaking his or her best shot in the context of the report.” But when Stossel did a show trashing organic food, he not only badgered Katherine DiMatteo, executive director of the Organic Trade Association, but also took some of her remarks out of context and left on the cutting-room floor comments that would have balanced those of the program’s main organic food opponent (see “Food Fight,” page 38).

When Stossel’s “reporting” becomes too incendiary or opinionated, the network simply flashes the subtitle “Commentary” under his face, as it did during his self-declared proudest achievement, a special on risk titled “Are We Scaring Ourselves to Death?” when he turned to the camera, clenched his lantern jaw and asked, “What if simply having so many regulations kills people?” Two producers working on that special were so disturbed by Stossel’s writing and editing, and so frustrated by his unwillingness to air anyone who believed that lowering risk meant reducing injury, that they left ABC halfway through production.

Stossel acknowledges his political mutation but says there was
no epiphany. Earlier, he had simply “bought into what was trendy,” he told Reason magazine years after his transformation. Then he stopped himself. “Trendy is harsh—what was prevailing wisdom at the time, which was that capitalism is useful but evil,” he said. He believed then “that markets are cruel and that we need aggressive consumer regulation…to protect the consumer from being victimized.” He said he gradually came to realize “that regulation rarely worked on even the most obvious of crooks, that people selling breast enlargers and penis enlargers…would get away with it.” From that observation Stossel drew the conclusion that “freedom works” and that regulation of business makes no sense whatsoever. (He declined repeated requests to be interviewed for this story.)

This transformation turned Stossel overnight into a journalist whom corporate advertisers could love and support. And that made him into an asset ABC bean counters could not afford to lose. When Rupert Murdoch took a shine to Stossel toward the end of the 1990s—no one involved will be more specific—a quiet bidding war ensued between ABC and Fox Broadcasting. Of course Stossel won, as he would have no matter which network prevailed. He signed a seven-figure, three-year contract with ABC and gained the right to produce four one-hour specials a year on topics of his choice, along with a staff of eight assistants to produce them.

In those specials and his regular “Give Me a Break” column on 20/20, Stossel expresses his politics through story topics like Chilean Social Security (totally privatized, and for Stossel the way to go, despite the loss of benefits to millions of Chileans), government regulation (which Stossel regards as thuggish paternalism), tort lawyers (ambulance-chasing bloodsuckers), environmental education (green “scaremongers” terrifying innocent schoolchildren), chemical sensitivity (pushed by whiny hypochondriacs exploited by greedy doctors), greed (a good thing for the economy), risk (the distorted creation of “junk science”), Erin Brockovich (all wet about PG&E), disabled Americans (a powerful lobby that’s costing business billions), product liability (crackpot lawsuits), school-bus seatbelts (a waste of money) and an hourlong special, loaded with spurious statistical data, claiming that by any measure of social or economic strength America is “Number One.”

From the beginning, Stossel has had his detractors. Lowell Bergman, who left ABC in 1983 to join CBS’s 60 Minutes, recalls, “I was Stossel’s first producer at ABC. They sent him to me while I was working on a CIA story in Mexico. They parachuted him in to be my correspondent. He was a maniac, a know-nothing who wanted to impose himself on the story, without having a clue what it was about. When we got back to New York, I wouldn’t let him into the editing room.” Bergman is not alone. At least six ABC producers and editors have told management they refuse to work with Stossel. Others to whom I spoke said they hoped they would never be assigned to do so.

Stossel is unique and too odd to be considered typical. But

Food Fight

One of the most heavily quoted sources in John Stossel’s “The Food You Eat”—in which Stossel claimed that “buying organic could kill you”—was an outspoken critic of organic farming named Dennis Avery. Stossel introduced Avery as “a former researcher for the Agriculture Department,” but it was Avery’s more recent position with the Center for Global Food Issues, a project of the conservative Hudson Institute, that informed his ardent support of chemical agriculture. The Hudson Institute and Avery’s project are both supported by generous contributions from Monsanto, DuPont, Novartis, ConAgra, DowElanco, The Olin Foundation and the Ag-Chem Equipment Company, all of whom profit from the sale of products prohibited in organic production.

Avery maintained that organically grown food is no more nutritious than conventional food (an unproven claim), that organic food had been found contaminated with E. coli (a true but misleading allegation, as most E. coli is harmless) and that pesticide residues had not been found on organic or conventional produce, a finding, Stossel said, of studies that had been contracted by ABC News to an independent laboratory.

After “The Food You Eat” aired, the network was inundated with angry mail. Katherine DiMatteo, executive director of the Organic Trade Association, who was interviewed for the show, called the story “distorted and inaccurate.” Ken Cook of the Environmental Working Group in Washington offered hard evidence that the studies Stossel said had been done on pesticide residues had never been performed. And Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting, a New York media watchdog group, questioned Dennis Avery’s claims and credentials.

ABC vice president Kerry Marash, whose job includes watching for infractions of editorial practice, invited critics in to present their case. Marash declined to be interviewed, on the instructions of the network’s media relations director, but people who know her say she was deeply disturbed by Stossel’s handling of the organic food and farming story, as well as other Stossel programs and that she wanted to talk about it.

Subsequently, ABC announced that Stossel would offer a public apology, live, on 20/20, involving aspects of the program. Stossel did apologize—to his audience, but not to an industry he had badly damaged. “I said our tests found no pesticide residues on either conventional or organic produce,” he said. “That was just wrong…. I apologize for the error [and] am deeply sorry I misled you…. All we have in this business is our credibility—your trust that we get it right—I will make every effort to see that it never happens again.” In a personal letter to Katherine DiMatteo, Marash did apologize “to organic farmers.”

David Fitzpatrick, the producer of the show, was eventually let go by ABC in one of those severances shrouded in mutual secrecy. Fitzpatrick did tell me that he received “a cash settlement,” but not before signing “a detailed nondisclosure agreement about the incident.” Was Fitzpatrick sacrificed? Many who knew him at ABC and remember the incident think so. Stossel, they believe, was carefully positioned by network executives as an unwitting victim of sloppy reporting by a subordinate. It was easier and less expensive for ABC to buy off and silence a low-six-figure producer than to cancel the contract of a million-dollar superstar.

M.D.
what he represents, as I learned from scores of on- and off-the-record interviews with people high and low in the television business, is the single-minded focus on money that has come to define how the networks operate, including their news divisions. “The sad thing about Stossel and his ascendency,” says Bergman, now a producer and correspondent for PBS’s Frontline, “is that he is the future. He symbolizes the transformation of news into ideological entertainment.”

John Stossel was discovered by Victor Neufeld, at one time the executive producer of 20/20 and now overseer of all of ABC’s magazine shows. “Invented” might be a better word, because as boss, mentor, champion, defender, friend, Neufeld remade Stossel from an ordinary beat reporter into a high-profile correspondent. Neufeld, although “not a news visionary,” according to one of his producers, does know better than most broadcast executives what works on television. “He has a gut sense of what people want,” says the producer: “controversy and likability.” Stossel thrives on controversy, and has Q-ratings any correspondent would die for.

Q-ratings, which are based on focus interviews, measure likability. They are essentially emotional responses of viewers to face and voice, and have nothing to do with content, credibility or journalistic integrity. Though few anchors or correspondents care to admit it, Q-ratings are a vital currency for TV talent. Stossel’s most impressive Q-ratings are found among the all-important commercial demographic group of middle-aged, middle-class, mid-American women, who recognize him immediately and find him “attractive,” “honest” and “open.”

High Q-ratings are worth millions in contract negotiations. The public rarely learns how much talent is really paid, but wild rumors circulate of multimillion-dollar salaries paid to Barbara Walters, Mike Wallace, Diane Sawyer and John Stossel. “They’re all exaggerated,” according to talent agent Richard Leibner, who negotiated a contract for Stossel that most ABC producers I spoke to believe is in the range of $2–$4 million a year. One such producer told me, “We never know what correspondents make, but if it was less than ten times what we make, they’d probably admit it.” Her income, she said, was “low six figures—very low.”

Stossel’s “The Food You Eat,” an organic food and farming story that aired on February 4, 2002, was heaven-sent to Neufeld: innocent consumers ripped off by a self-righteous $6 billion industry making false claims about the nutrition and safety of organic produce. It was perfect fare for a ratings-obsessed executive who, when he wasn’t wandering through the office tearing pages out of People and handing them out as story ideas, was teasing his correspondents about the minute-by-minute ratings reports on their latest segments. Before he moved upstairs, Neufeld ran a betting pool over which news events would and would not prompt viewers to switch channels. His own favorites—one about a pen pal to serial killers, another about an armless aerobics instructor and a third, an hourlong visit with two New York hookers—had viewers glued to their tubes. Neufeld won his bets. “We try to do good journalism at the same time that we get watched,” he later told The New Yorker.

Neufeld knew the organics spot would grab and hold a huge market share. “Killer food” stories always do. So he would shoot for “sweeps,” those magic weeks during which ratings determine advertising rates for the season to follow. It’s probably also safe to assume that Neufeld’s wife, Lois, a New York PR practitioner with major clients in the chemical industry, would have been pleased when Victor came home to report the scheduled broadcast of a show defending the agricultural use of pesticides, herbicides, rodenticides, fungicides, soil sterilants and synthetic fertilizers—all forbidden under state and federal organic standards.

Rashing organics was also a golden opportunity for a rising star of the libertarian think-tank community and darling of corporate polluters to advance a speaking career on the anti-regulatory rubber-chicken circuit, which earns Stossel more than $200,000 a year. Stossel himself has talked about the “absurdly high honoraria” paid by people who “like to be told they are good guys.” His ABC contract forbids him to keep any of his speaking fees, so the money goes to a charitable entity called the Palmer R. Chitester Fund, which buys videos of Stossel’s ABC specials and packages them for classroom viewing with study guides footnoting the Heritage Foundation, Cato Institute, Young America’s Foundation and the Wall Street Journal Op-Ed page. Episodes sell for about $40 a copy ($160 for the series), under the brand name “Stossel in the Classroom.” (For more on Stossel’s classroom connections, see “The Right in the Classroom,” by Marianne Manilov, at www.thenation.com.)

However, as Stossel ascended to media stardom and attained hero status on the libertarian right, he became a major headache for the executive suite at ABC headquarters. “They are terrified of dealing with the guy as a journalist,” one veteran reporter told me. “He’s a pain in the ass who keeps some of the best minds on the fifth floor in perpetual damage control. But I guess he’s worth the effort, because although they’re horrified by his behavior, they keep him on. He’s a cash cow.” He’s also ABC’s best protection against the “liberal media” indictment.

Of course, all media outlets should have contrarians on hand to puncture sanctimonious claims from all sides of the great arguments of our time. But contrarians should be smart, courageous and willing to air the positions of adversaries, even debate with them in public. And if they are going to be packaged and marketed as journalists, contrarians should be held to the same standards as any other journalists. There are many people, some of them seemingly powerful professionals and executives at the networks, who agree with that sentiment. But they are not running the show.

An easy solution would be for ABC to change Stossel’s title from “correspondent” to “commentator,” his role from reporter to pundit, or better yet move him from News to Entertainment. Then replace him with a real journalist and assign that person to cover the challenging and controversial topics of our times in a fair and professional manner. Otherwise, at the beginning of each special, Stossel should simply offer this public confession: “I’m not a journalist, but I play one on TV.”
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of course, depends on the direction of the war. The US campaign has been very positive; whether it remains that way, at will and show their enterprise. To date, their reporting on the war is enlightening; in that regard, the conflict seemed on its way to reprising the Gulf War. In the end, though, it was the Taliban that proved the main obstacle to newsgathering, and as it collapsed, journalists were able to fan out throughout Afghanistan and have filed many interesting items—about the fighting in Afghanistan, US reversals with the Arab world, the hunt for Al Qaeda collaborators. On NPR, hardly a day goes by without the featuring at least one story that you haven’t heard elsewhere. And, night after night, The NewsHour With Jim Lehrer has served up an array of knowledgeable experts able to parse events in far-off lands.

Yet tune in to the network newscasts, or to the cable news channels, or to the radio talk shows, and you can’t help being appalled at the thinness of the reports, the absence of creative news judgment, the shameless jingoism, the weepy self-absorption. From Hardball, The Capital Gang, Meet the Press and Today, to Geraldo, Imus, Dan and Peter, commercial TV and radio seem to be conspiring to close the American mind. While some media monitors have taken heart from the large swatches of time the networks have devoted to international affairs, seeing in it a sign that Americans indeed have an appetite for world news, I remain pessimistic on this score. Already, in fact, the networks seem to be returning to the status quo ante, stressing news about consumer goods, health and the weather. As the Bush Administration contemplates extending the war on terrorism into new theaters, the lack of a broadly informed public could prove very costly.

In other respects, developments since September have been more positive. In the initial phase of the war in Afghanistan, US reporters seemed stymied by the Pentagon’s tight grip on information; in that regard, the conflict seemed on its way to reprising the Gulf War. In the end, though, it was the Taliban that proved the main obstacle to newsgathering, and as it collapsed, journalists were able to fan out throughout Afghanistan and have filed many sparkling reports. From a press standpoint, this conflict seems less like the Gulf War than Vietnam, with reporters able to move about at will and show their enterprise. To date, their reporting on the US campaign has been very positive; whether it remains that way, of course, depends on the direction of the war.

On the home front, meanwhile, the early concern about the lack of dissent and diversity in the media has given way to a growing taste for debate on a range of issues—the stimulus package in Congress, the government’s response to the anthrax threat, the use of preventive detention and of military tribunals. There are limits, of course. People who think the United States should have turned the other cheek in responding to September 11 (a numerically marginal group) still have a hard time getting a hearing. But the type of furious reaction that greeted Susan Sontag’s angry comments in The New Yorker in the days immediately after the attack could not, I think, happen today.

The main problem with the commentary about September 11 is not the range of voices but the quality of the analysis. The level of triumphalism and belligerence churned out by our columnists has been embarrassing to behold. The willingness of TV producers and Op-Ed page editors to give a podium to, for instance, former Director of Central Intelligence James Woolsey, whose views seem oblivious to the laws of evidence, mystifies me. Even more dismaying has been the acclaim accorded Thomas Friedman. Of all his many pandering pronouncements since September 11, one has stayed with me. Speaking with Tim Russert on Meet the Press, Friedman quoted a Kuwaiti friend as saying, “We Arabs are very good at never forgetting what happened 1,000 years ago, but we can’t remember what happened ten years ago.” Such patronizing helps explain why many Arabs have concluded that the US media are hopelessly biased against them.

In writing “Press Watch,” I constantly wrestled with what I think is the greatest challenge facing anyone analyzing the attacks of September 11: finding a way to raise questions about US actions in the world without seeming to apologize for terrorism. On the one hand, there’s the pitfall of the “blowback” school, with its insistence that the United States, by virtue of its invidious interventions around the world, somehow had it coming. This is blame-America-first-ism of the worst kind. On the other, there’s the fear of inciting the bash-the-left camp, which holds that any discussion of US actions constitutes giving in to Osama bin Laden. In light of what’s happened to us, how can we not take a hard look at our policies and figure out how to do better? Finding an intellectual framework that can accommodate both a tough stand on terrorism and a reassessment of America’s role in the world seems the greatest task facing intellectuals, policy-makers and, yes, journalists.

THE ABU-JAMAL VERDICT

It’s good news any time a death sentence is set aside; at the end of a year that has brought sixty-six executions, we welcome US District Judge William Yohn Jr’s December 18 ruling overturning the sentencing of Mumia Abu-Jamal. The judge ordered a new sentencing hearing because of what he described as unconstitutional and misleading instructions to the jurors in the original trial. In the longer run, the ruling only insures appeals by both sides (see Bruce Shapiro at www.thenation.com). Also on the web: Shapiro on airport racial profiling and the misuse of executive privilege.
And, in that regard, I think there is one major dimension of the September 11 story the press has consistently botched: Islam. In the early weeks after the attacks, commentators seemed to go out of their way to provide a sanitized, anodyne version of the faith. More recently, as the United States has prosecuted its campaign in Afghanistan and as the perfidy of the Taliban has become glaringly apparent, the press seems to be harping on Islam’s extremist tendencies. Both versions are, I think, caricatures. The newsmedia in this country (whose staffs, incidentally, include very few Muslims), seem ill equipped to explain this complex, confounding and diverse creed to which a billion people subscribe. I hope they’ll find a way to do better.

Now, does saying that make me soft on terrorism?

MICHAEL MASSING

Ms. Heads West

At Ms. magazine’s thirtieth birthday party in early December, Gloria Steinem—in leopard print and we’ve-come-a-long-way-baby leather pants—delivered some big news: Cash-starved Ms. is moving to Los Angeles and merging with the LA-based Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF), helmed by Second Wave icon and former NOW leader Eleanor Smeal. “Ms.’s new home is exactly the right one,” she said, adding to a knowing audience’s suppressed chuckles, “It’s a perfect marriage.”

Steinem is by now well practiced at such announcements. “This will be a very important and helpful change for the magazine,” said Steinem in 1987, when Fairfax Publishing bought Ms. and undid its not-for-profit status. “A necessary change,” she said two years later, when Lang Communications stepped in. In 1996, when MacDonald Communications bought Ms., she said, “I hope things will take an upward turn”; and in 1998, when her own Liberty Media for Women took control, she acknowledged, “As readers change, Ms. has to change.”

“They’ve been through so many changes that you just get used to it after a while,” says Sharon Lerner, a Village Voice writer who has written for Ms. “I’m not at all surprised to hear they’re reforming, but I’m also not at all surprised that they’ll make it through. They’re survivors; they’re hanging on.” Harry Reasoner infamously quipped when Ms. was launched that the magazine wouldn’t last six issues; it would run out of things to say (he issued a public apology five years later). While history has proved Reasoner wrong, it hasn’t been a smooth course for the magazine. Halfway through this trip, Ms. took the political stand of ending all advertiser support, relying solely on readership, now around 150,000. “It’s no secret that we’ve had a serious cash crisis for a long time now,” says departing editor in chief Marcia Gillespie.

Does this reflect hard times for feminism itself? “It’s dangerous to equate what’s happening with Ms. with what’s happening with feminism,” says Sharon Lerner. All the same, the magazine has had a decade that has been shaky at best, coinciding with a period in which many feminists have seen the dwindling of the political movement. “I think feminism as a movement—not as an idea or a sensibility or a cultural fact—is at a very low ebb in this country right now,” says writer and professor Ellen Willis. “A movement has to be about mass activism, about being able to get your issues front and center in the public conversation and put on genuine pressure to do something about them, and this does not exist on a national scale.”

Not surprisingly, the people who turned out for the birthday celebration in Manhattan looked closer in age to Elizabeth Cady Stanton than Sarah Jessica Parker. The contents of the giveaway goody bags were largely related to estrogen replacement. And the tone was nostalgic. In the testimonials to its enduring power, Ms. was often referred to in the past tense. “I don’t know what I would have done without Ms.,” said a teary Jane Fonda, after disclosing her age, 64. “My mother had the good wisdom to make sure her daughters had Ms. magazine,” attorney Roberta Riley declared, holding the hand of her own daughter.

Of course, the FMF hopes moving the magazine to Los Angeles will help to restore one of the movement’s central symbols. While there’s still no defined plan for the shape of the magazine to come—they don’t even know who will be editing it—Smeal stresses that local access to celebrities will make the magazine more visible. After all, the FMF joined Mavis Leno (wife of Jay) to gain attention for the Taliban’s abuse of women long before September 11. “This is standard in organizing in a popular-culture-saturated nation,” says Martha Burke, chairwoman of the National Council of Women’s Organizations. “It’s really this simple: It’s the difference between me calling an editor or booker and saying ‘Gee, I’d like to be on TV’ and Mavis Leno doing it. She’ll get on, and I won’t.”

A central part of the mission is to raise the profile of feminism in the wider culture in order to influence politics. “The whole point is to get real stories into mainstream media,” says Leslie Calman, executive vice president at the NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund, whose Women’s E-news service was created to get women’s news out to the mainstream press. Many activists and feminist writers are quick to point out that mainstream women’s magazines contribute a great deal to the reporting and dissemination of these stories. Jessica Neuwirth, who chairs the board of the international women’s rights organization Equality Now, applauds Marie Claire’s coverage, and says Equality Now has gained numerous new members through stories they’ve read in the fashion-friendly glossy. “I don’t think it’s that grim of a picture,” concurs Cynthia Cooper, a freelancer who writes about women’s issues. “Oprah is a feminist, and her editors are feminists, and people are actually reading her magazine.” But still, she says, “we need writers and publishers who will continue to do what Ms. does. That’s a critical function of Ms. They find those stories and get them out there.”

Smeal says Ms. will now place a greater focus on international issues. “This situation in Afghanistan is an obvious doorway into reinvigorating things,” says Neuwirth. Some critics, on the other hand, doubt anti-Taliban outrage will stir up the masses within our own borders. “As for the Taliban ‘saving’ feminism, forget it,” says Willis. “We can only save ourselves, I’m afraid.” But will we save ourselves? As “postfeminism” becomes more a buzzword than feminism itself (and “grassroots” a mere relic of vocabulary), perhaps in this next phase the magazine will become a bridge connecting the public with politics, putting the movement back in feminism. Ms.’s latest reincarnation may finally be the right survival strategy for the magazine—but let’s hope it will be a survival that really matters.

LAUREN SANDLER

Lauren Sandler writes about media and culture. She lives in New York.
NARCOCORRIDO: A Journey Into the Music of Drugs, Guns, and Guerrillas.
By Elijah Wald.

TRUE TALES FROM ANOTHER MEXICO: The Lynch Mob, the Popsicle Kings, Chalino, and the Bronx.
By Sam Quinones.
University of New Mexico. 336 pp. $29.95.

Rosalino “Chalino” Sánchez isn’t someone you are likely to know about. Yet his legendary role as the revitalizer of the corrido—as the Mexican border folk song is known—is unquestionable among the 24 million people who inhabit the territories that unite or separate Mexico and the United States. In fact, his reputation reaches far beyond, from his native state of Sinaloa to the nearby Coahuila and Durango and, emphatically, to the Mexican “suburbs” of Los Angeles, where Chalino spent his most artistically fruitful years. Songs popularized by him like the “Corridos de Amistad” are listened to religiously on the radio in cantinas and at birthday parties, malls and mechanic shops. His cassettes and CDs are astonishingly popular. By all accounts a mediocre singer with little stage charisma, he is nevertheless a folk hero of epic proportions to Mexicans. Soon after his mysterious death in Culiacán in 1992, close to 150 corridos about his plight were recorded. This, in the opinion of ethnomusicologists, makes him the most written about corrido subject ever. That the Anglo music radar refuses to acknowledge Chalino’s durability is, to my ears, proof of abysmal distrust. He is a bestseller in a tradition whose luminaries often make it to the Billboard Latin chart, one that even though MTV en Español refuses to embrace, on the grounds that its stars are unappealing 40-plus-year-old males, is not only more popular than tropical rhythms—salsa, merengue, cumbia—but also accounts for approximately two-thirds of overall Latin record sales in the United States. The explanation of Chalino’s anonymity among nonbelievers is more complex: Together with scores of other solo corridistas and troupes, like Jenni Rivera and Los Hermanos Jiménez, like Los Pajaritos del Sur and Grupo Exterminador, he eulogized in his lyrics a symbol regularly satanized in the English-language media: the narcotrafficker.

The protagonists of Chalino’s songs and those of his peers are immigrants to the United States. The songs address urgent political and social issues head-on: poverty, drug traffic, injustice, discrimination and the disillusionment of a life built chasing the ever-evasive dollar bill. (The term corrido comes from correr, “to run.”) In one ballad a couple of girls disguise themselves as nuns and drive a van full of cocaine, which they claim is powdered milk for an orphanage in Phoenix. In another, two brothers, Carlos and Raúl, are the owners of a circus that uses unfair strategies to push other circuses out of business. The circus, of course, is an allegory of the Mexico of the late 1980s and early 1990s: The names are obvious references to former Mexican president Carlos Salinas de Gortari and his drug-money convict brother, Raúl. These and similar lyrics insert themselves into one of the oldest rural musical traditions of the New World. They deliver a rough-and-tumble plot succinctly, offering a recognizable startup that leads to a denouement, all the while following a rhymed meter that is simple and straightforward. In that sense they are structurally similar to the British broadside, the cowboy songs of the Southwest and gangsta rap.

These songs are the principal instrument chronicling the odyssey of Mexicans across the Rio Grande in a drug-infested universe.

Ilan Stavans teaches Latin American and Latino culture at Amherst College. On Borrowed Words: A Memoir of Language (Viking) is his latest book, with a volume on Octavio Paz forthcoming.
The corrido spread its influence in the nineteenth century but reached its apex during the Mexican Revolution, which started in 1910, when political figures like Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, as well as prototypes like the female soldier La Soldadera, were the stuff of corridos. I’ve heard corridos about bandit Tiburcio Vázquez and labor activist César Chávez, about the late Tejana singer Selena, and revolutionary Subcomandante Marcos, even about scholar and folklorist Américo Paredes. These figures are extolled in a way that allows people to spill their emotion.

There are also corridos that address historical events. In fact, the vitality of the form lies in the fact that no sooner does an important incident take place than a song is already available to reflect on it. This immediacy is crucial; it grants the song the quality of a news report. There are corridos about police brutality in Los Angeles against Rodney King and the tragedy of September 11. A handful of movies have even been based on corridos, including the highbrow The Ballad of Gregorio Cortés, directed by Robert Young. The narcocorrido is a slightly different item, though: Once a subgenre of the tradition, it has emerged since the 1970s as the principal instrument to chronicle the odyssey of Mexicans across the Rio Grande in a drug-infested universe.

In the past few months a couple of US journalists have published insightful books on the narcocorrido that serve as compasses to navigate critically the cultural scene. Perhaps this is a sign that the US radar is finally becoming less dogmatic and more flexible to subtleties in the catalogue of Latin musical variations. Elijah Wald, a Bostonian whose father was a Nobel Prize honoree, is a nomadic guitarist responsible for the biography Josh White: Society Blues. Wald was for a time the music critic of the Boston Globe. His book on the narcocorrido offers an enlightening rendezvous: Rather than dwell on the origin and varieties of this sort of ballad in a scholarly mode, he delivers a travelogue. For almost eight months he hitchhiked, with a guitar on his back, across the Southwest, northern and central Mexico, and down to Chiapas. He talks to truck drivers, impresarios, vocalists, and fans. The reader at times stumbles upon anecdotes that might add little to the overall context of the topic, yet these detours, approached with patience, are a midrash to understand the overall context that nurtures this kind of transnational phenomenon. (Wald’s volume is also available in a Spanish-language version, and selections of the ballads discussed in its pages are featured on the CD Corridos y Narcocorridos, released by Fonovisa.)

Sam Quinones, a freelancer whose attention has been focused on Mexico since 1994, has a literary manner that tends toward a condensed, almost telegraphic narrative; this brevity I find both appealing and empathic. He also is less patient than Wald, which results in an eagelike overview of the ballads themselves that left me hungry for examples. Actually, his True Tales From Another Mexico is only marginally about narcotics; instead, it is a collection of profiles of various personalities and a survey of popular themes that pertain to what Quinones describes as “the other side of Mexico.” In his introduction, he argues that “the [foreign] press, other governments, and tourists are most aware of the official, elite, corrupt Mexico; the Mexico that won’t allow a poor man a chance; the Mexico behind the sunglasses.” He then adds: “I’ve even been told by people, including Mexicans, that this is Mexican culture. But I know that’s not true.” In response, Quinones follows the unlikely life of soap-opera diva Verónica Castro, as well as the unascertained path of the discoverers of the Popsicle—la paleta—in Tumucum, Michoacán, and the rise of their business empire: La Michoacana.

But the chapters in Quinones’s book I was mostly drawn to are about Chalino Sanchez, an archetypal narcocorrido singer, and about the so-called “Angel of the Poor”: Jesús Malverde. These two figures strike me as veritable paradigms of complex popular sentiment. Malverde, for instance, is the type of magnet of collective faith that allows people to sustain themselves through violence and loss. Did he ever exist? How to explain that thousands of people stop regularly at his shrine in Culiacán to ask for a miracle—from a recovery from illness to protection against the federal police and the narcotraffickers? Scholars of various persuasions claim he is a fusion of Catholic iconography and the biographical leftovers of Sinaloa outlaw Heraclio Bernal, another representative of the oppressed, executed in 1909 by a meanspirited governor and hung for weeks on a tree. But Eligio González, a composer and self-made entrepreneur devoted to the construction and administration of La Capilla, a chapel dedicated to honor Malverde, believes that the bandit’s name was Jesús Juárez Maso, and that Malverde became his apppellative “because of the green [verde] plants in which he used to hide himself from the rurales, the rural police.” In any case, Malverde, he explains, was a self-righteous bandit who was one day severely wounded, according to the legend. His condition was desperate; he seemed to be dying. Suddenly, he decided to sacrifice himself by requesting that a friend of his turn him in so as to collect a reward posted on his name. Malverde then asked the friend to distribute the money among the dispossessed. He especially cared for those involved in the drug trade, thus his nickname, El Narcosantón, an unofficial narcosaint.

González is known in Sinaloa for handling out wheelchairs and coffins, and for officiating at funerals. In La Capilla he has placed various narcocorridos about Malverde on sale. Also available are human-size busts of him, and Wald includes a photograph of one in his book. He describes how these sculptures came about: at the request of González, of course, to satisfy a devout folk in need of a tangible object of worship. Given that no material evidence of the bandit has ever been available, González commissioned a local sculptor to make the sculptures. He tells Wald: “Since at that time [Mexican movie stars] Pedro Infante and Jorge Negrete were popular, I said to him, ‘Look, [Malverde] was a good-looking boy, white, and so that people will identify with him, make him somewhere in between Pedro Infante and Jorge Negrete.’” González also describes Malverde’s miracles. For instance, the Sinaloan government once decided to build a state office building in the land where people congregated to pay tribute to El Narcosantón. A huge protest ensued, lasting two years. In that time stones jumped like popcorn on the ground, machinery frequently broke down and other mishaps occurred. In the end the building was finished, but the aggregated faith among the people was by then undefeatable. A portion of the illustrious “Corrido a Jesús Malverde” follows:

Voy a cantar un corrido de una historia verdadera,
De un bandido generoso que robaba dondequiera.
Jesús Malverde era un hombre que a los pobres ayudaba,
Por eso lo defendían cuando la ley lo buscaba.
(I am going to sing a corrido of a true story, Of a generous bandit who robbed wherever he went. Jesús Malverde was a man who helped the poor, Because of that, they protected him when the law was after him.)

Truth, generosity and bravado. Most of the narcocorridos I’m acquainted with are similar in tone. They celebrate the semi-fictitious adventures of a righteous person, usually a man, who dared to fight against the establishment. It is as if the best of Mexico, its source of endurance, was built against the current. The lyrics by composers like Paulino Vargas, Julián Garza and Jesse Armenta are fatalistic in nature; they recount bloody encounters in which individuals avenge themselves in order to leave their dignity intact. Dignidad, indeed, is what the narcocorridos are about: the supremacy of honor.

In what he described as “a journey into the music of drugs, guns, and guerrillas,” Wald patiently explores the half-accomplished modernity that colors northern Mexico, where the drug business has radically transformed people’s daily routine but has left untouched the sense of morality. The people he comes across are never appalled by the consumption of narcotics. Why should they be? As a bystander tells him, that is someone else’s problem. Their immigrant’s sole concern is with survival: la sobrevivencia. In The Labyrinth of Solitude, Octavio Paz once described Mexicans as unafraid of death. The narcocorrido is proof of it. Malverde, for instance, is anything but a submissive figure. He is eager to subvert the official rule, although he knows his subversion will ultimately be ineffective. In no way does he follow the pattern of a Stallone/Rocky archetype, who is able to overcome, with charisma and stamina, every obstacle to emerge in front of him. In the end, Rocky is the underdog who becomes an undisputed bell cow. No such emblem exists in the Spanish-language drug culture: In this ballad, as in “The Wetback’s Grave,” “The Circus” and countless others, the concept of the underdog is alien to such a degree that the Spanish language doesn’t have a close translation of it. Malverde is a source of endurance; in the end, though, the establishment—the gringos, the corrupt politicos—prevails. Still, confrontation is embraced by corridistas. For them, a dignified death is better than a life lived on one’s knees. Sooner or later, society figures out a way to pay tribute to the martyr.
In the case of Malverde, his timelessness is to be found not only in La Capilla and the handsome busts on sale but also in the Denny’s-like cafeterias called Coco’s Malverde and Chico’s Malverde, as well as in businesses like Malverde Clutch & Brakes. According to Quinones, there’s even a corporate connection Eligio González has established with Pepsi-Cola. As it happens, local distributors give the saint’s caretaker discounts so he can sell soda at concerts and dances of narcocorridistas, allowing him to keep the profits for El Narcosantón.

Of the myriad troubadours who parade in the volumes under review, probably the most emblematic is Chalino, whose crystalized style has been compared, in its impact, to that of Elvis Presley, Bob Dylan and Aretha Franklin. Thus, I’m delighted to see his travels here-by delineated for an English-language audience. His impact among youth is so fertile—the reader is exposed to a trend of Chalino sound-alikes that, demographically and in ambition, eclipses even the mania over Elvis. Wald recalls how in ten minutes a record-store owner showed him cassettes and CDs of twenty-five different so-called chalinitos. I own three of his records; his voice is rough and uninspiring, though his lyrics are appealing. As in Malverde’s case, it is no doubt the myth, the way people inject their own dreams into Chalino’s life, that holds the clue to his celebrity. For he was a warrior, and that is how every immigrant, no matter the background, wants to see himself: as a fearless combatant. He was killed in a shootout at the age of 31. This isn’t at all unexpected, of course; almost certainly got the chance to become a nobody, unexposed to the written word, a form, need-less to say, that is authentically democratic.

News of his death spread far and wide through technology—radio, TV, e-mail. But in the migrant communities it was through narcocorridos that news of the tragedy was widely disseminated. It was through these ballads that Chalino became famous, and it was through them that he was immortalized. This adds another crucial aspect, one that Quinones discusses in some detail: “In the Mexican badlands,” he argues, “where the barrel of a gun makes the law, for generations dating back to the mid-1800s, the corrido recounted the worst, best, and bloodiest exploits of men.” Indeed, the corridos are the newspaper of an illiterate people. And they are something else: For migrants weary of corrupt politicians, this is a literary form that is alive for those unexposed to the written word. This is a form, needless to say, that is authentically democratic, one in which people express themselves in full.

Democracy isn’t a system to which the immigrants have been exposed. They run away from a dictatorial regime, looking for a better future elsewhere. They often don’t find it. Still, the corrido allows them to see themselves as a sense of freedom. What has kept the tradition alive in the border region is the fact that workers with scarcely a cent to spare are eager to unpool what to them is a handsome sum to a composer to tailor-make a ballad about the customer’s own journey. Chalino’s career flourished in large measure thanks to the endless commissions he received from his avid customers. In the melodic tales he told about his own, Un donnadie, a nobody, unexpectedly got the chance to become un alguien, a somebody, at least for the few minutes that Chalino’s stanzas lasted. And in taped form, replayed time and again, they could last forever. Producer Abel Orozco put Chalino’s contribution in perspective
for Quinones: “Before, they’d only do corridos about legendary figures. Now people want to hear about themselves while they’re alive. Although they may be nobodies, they want to make themselves known. Corridos have become, over the last several years, a little less news and a little more publicity for common people. They’re fifteen minutes of fame that they pay for themselves.”

Chalino the Mexican immigrant: Isn’t he an American hero too?

Age of Innocence
ARTHUR C. DANTO

NORMAN ROCKWELL

W hen the archforger Hans van Meegeren undertook to hoodwink the experts by painting what they accepted as a theretofore unknown Vermeer, his motives were more devious than those of the ordinary counterfeiter. For he believed himself to be an underappreciated painter and Vermeer’s equal. The moment his Christ at Emmaus was purchased by the state on the authority of the leading Vermeer specialists, van Meegeren meant to reveal that it was he who had painted this masterpiece. And since the experts believed the painting was by Vermeer, they were obliged in consistency to acknowledge van Meegeren as Vermeer’s peer. Much the same form of proof was used by Alan Turing to argue that computers possess intelligence. If a computer printed out a set of answers to a literary quiz that were just like those a human being would have given, then one would have in consistency to attribute intelligence to the machine, since human beings possess it by default. And, with qualifications, something like this form of argument has been invoked by enthusiasts for the art of Norman Rockwell to validate their admiration. Suppose it can be shown that Rockwell employed the pictorial strategies also found in the Dutch genre painters of the seventeenth century? Or that the smiling veteran, seated at the counter in Rockwell’s After the Prom, plays the role of an internal observer, in much the way that a lordling does when he looks up the skirt of a woman on a swing in Fragonard’s The Swing? Or that the wall before which the little black schoolgirl is being escorted by burly federal marshals in Rockwell’s 1964 The Problem We All Live With looks like a Twombly? Since there are these affinities, and since Twombly is in MoMA, Fragonard in the Wallace Collection and Jan Steen in the National Gallery, what save prejudice explains the absence of Rockwell from those validating walls?

No such arguments are needed to prove that Vermeer was a great artist—we learn the meaning of “great artist” through his work. Similarly, we have no need of indirect proof that human beings possess intelligence, for what would intelligence mean if human beings lacked it? No one had to prove the artistic merit of Dutch genre painting—or Fragonard—by appealing to the work of other artists, and in the case of Twombly there are no other artists whose work shows that his must be accepted if theirs is. So why does a case have to be made for Rockwell? Why is there a special problem with him? What makes his work so controversial? In a way, if he weren’t as good as he was, the question would hardly arise. No one has undertaken to establish the artistic merit of the large number of Rockwell’s contemporaries whose primary venues were the covers of magazines in the golden age of magazine illustration. Almost from the beginning, Rockwell stood out as someone with exceptional gifts. There is no lobby for James Montgomery Flagg or J.C. Leyendecker or N.C. Wyeth or Peter Arno or the legions of other cover artists whose work caught the public’s eye on the nation’s newsstands. So why not accept him for the wonder he was? None of the artists whose affinity to him has been enlisted in his support had what he had.

“Loving Rockwell is shunning complexity,” the critic of the Village Voice declares, who goes on to concede that “many of Rockwell’s illustrations can turn you into a quivering ball of mush.” Of how many painters in the history of art is something like that true? It seems to me the pictorial psychology of paintings that can have that effect transcends present knowledge. It implies skills of a kind the painters of the Counter-Reformation would have given their eyeteeth to command. Painting is not simply what takes place on the canvas. It is what goes on between the canvas and the viewer. Rockwell was one of the supreme masters of that space, an eroticist of human feeling, a rhetorician of visual persuasion. Small wonder every advertising director in the country was eager to sign him up!

“The emotions,” Aristotle writes in Book II of Rhetoric, “are all those feelings that so change men as to affect their judgments and that are also attended by pain or pleasure.” The ancient rhetoricians made it the object of their study to manipulate the emotions of their auditors, and rhetoric was widely regarded as practical knowledge of
a very valuable order. It was something politi-
cians had to possess, since they needed to
inspire confidence in themselves and dis-
trust of their opponents and hatred of the
common enemy. And it was what lawyers
needed to know in order to sway jurors, not
merely by argument but by coloration and
emphasis. The Sophists, who advertised
themselves as able to teach how to make the
better appear worse and the worse appear
better, were regarded as exceedingly dan-
gerous by Socrates, and we have a number
of dialogues in which Plato depicts him
wrestling with the leading rhetoricians of
the day—Protagoras, Gorgias, Thrasyl-
achus, Callicles and others—in an effort
to immunize his fellow Athenians against
their wiles. For somewhat parallel reasons,
Socrates regarded artists as dangerous, and
he famously undertook to exclude them
from the ideal Republic. To be sure, he had
poets primarily in mind. The visual arts
aroused his suspicions as well, but chiefly
in the respect that sculpture was capable
of causing illusions, or false beliefs, of a
somewhat restricted sort. It is a conjecture
on my part that classical artists did not
represent figures as themselves expressing
feelings, like suffering or ecstatic trans-
port. So artists did not evoke in their view-
ers feelings like anger or pity—the cases
Aristotle particularly addresses in connec-
tion with tragedy—which became central
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on my part that classical artists did not
represent figures as themselves expressing
feeling—or for the feelings he causes—but it
is there that what makes him distinctive as an artist must be found.

Consider After the Prom (1957). A young couple sit at a counter, which they share with a man in a work leather jacket and a sort of aviator's cap. He is probably a veteran, in any case middle-aged, and someone who knows life. The couple are in prom clothes—a white gown, a blue hair ribbon for her, a rented white dinner jacket and bow tie for him. She is showing her corsage to the counterman, while the boy, holding her pink sweater and white gloves, looks on with pride. The body of the counterman is composed in such a way as to express a visible and exaggerated Wow. The vet smiles over his coffee cup. The couple embody an innocence that contrasts with the counterman's feigned but well-intentioned wonder. It contrasts as well with the somewhat down at the heels décor of the diner—there are cigarette butts on the scuffed floor—and in some way redeems it. The couple have brought the freshness of this moment of their lives into the stale air of ordinary life. And everyone except the couple feels philosophical—the vet, the counterman and the reader. Everyone is touched. The world is a greasy spoon, beauty falls from the air, but there are moments of grace. The couple are bathed in the halo of their own innocence.

The figure of innocence is a central device in Rockwell's best paintings. There is, for example, the little boy and the elderly woman in Saying Grace, who enact a moment of prayer in another greasy spoon, oblivious of the pair of workmen with whom they must share a table. The workmen are outside the circle of innocence, but they are moved by those it encloses. They have not been so hardened by life that they cannot be touched by the act of simple faith, because we—the art critic of the Voice no less than you and I—are still moved when we look at his paintings. Rockwell often said that he was really an illustrator rather than an artist. By this he meant in part that art had taken a direction in the twentieth century away from representational art, so that he was, in effect, beached by history. History was Cubism, Futurism, Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism. And what was he painting? Babysitters, newlyweds, middle-aged papas and mamas, skinny adolescents, picturesque geezers, mutts, cleaning women, friendly cops, family doctors, Santa Claus. Real artists were out there making art history. He sat home all day making pictures. Picasso and Braque compared themselves to aviators and mountaineers. He would have liked to have compared himself to Rembrandt, Dürer, Van Gogh. Reproductions of their self-portraits are tacked to his canvas in his wry Triple Self-Portrait of 1960. But he knew ambitious artists were not going to inspire themselves with copies of Triple Self-Portrait fixed to their canvases. "Like Norman Rockwell" had become a term of derision. What he overlooked in this sour self-appraisal was that he was not just a painter of recognizable things. Norman Rockwells were themselves recognizable things. They were part of the world. They were not just illustrations of reality. They were part of the reality of his times. Anybody in America could pick them out like stop signs or American flags. The only other artist of whom something like this is true is Andy Warhol.

Rockwell's failures are his paintings that are just illustrations of reality, such as his painting of men walking on the moon, or that are merely ancillary to an implied text, such as his pictures of Daniel Boone or Ichabod Crane. Often these have odd proportions by comparison to the proportions of life. The innocence of the building needs paint. The innocence of the family, carrying prayer books, shields them from the squalor with which they are surrounded. We, who are touched by them, are not shielded. Still, the fact that we are touched by the contrast shows that there is some goodness in us after all. And this is what Rockwell wants to tell us. The world is decaying around us. Life's not a picnic. We do what we can. But we have been reassured. The tug on the heart proves that we still have one. Rockwell was not much of a churchgoer. Sunday was a workday, like every other. He is not addressing us as if we were persons who pray. He is addressing us as persons for whom prayer is not really part of our lives at all. And he is assuring us that we have good hearts even so. I say "us" because we—the art critic of the Voice no less than you and I—are still moved when we look at his paintings.

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of a standard magazine page. They are vertical or horizontal panels. The failures lack what I would call internality. They exclude the viewer from the reality they depict, by contrast with the Saturday Evening Post covers, where one feels oneself addressed as part of the reality. We belong to the form of life the picture shows. The picture is about us. Their familiarity entails that we are, even today, the same people as the ones he shows. The fact that we are still moved by so many of them means that the American personality has changed very little since the magazines that bore those images were fresh from the press. This is still the way Americans see themselves, and since how we see ourselves is part of who we are, there is a measure of truth in these pictures. This is what President Bush was referring to when he claimed to be amazed by the fact that Americans are hated in so many parts of the world. Even Rockwell knew it was not the whole truth when he painted those stirring images of the struggle for civil rights in the South for Look magazine.

Could those who expressed hatred for Ruby Bridges, the little black girl in the affecting vulnerability of her white frock, on her way to school, be the same Americans as those who saw themselves in the Saturday Evening Post covers? Could those who scribbled obscenities, who threw tomatoes, who jeered at innocence be the same people who smiled at innocence when those who displayed it were “like us”? That’s the question the exhibition leaves us with. Do the tender feelings Rockwell’s images instill define the default state of the American persona? Or does their existence define a moral myth? Who exactly are we?

FILMS

Home for the Holidays

STUART KLAWANS

The Royal Tenenbaums

Though it’s choked with dead bodies and disappointments, The Royal Tenenbaums comes before you with a smile. It wants you to know it’s a whimsical film: the kind of story you might check out of the young-adult section of the library, where the books have funny line drawings at the chapter heads. An unseen narrator speaks, in tones that remind you of afternoons spent tucked into an armchair, and the characters pop up on the screen, as if called from the pages of some latter-day E.B. White. Here is the family of eccentrics; and here is their big, comfortable house—limestone and turrets outside, dark wood and burgundy walls within—set on a cozy New York cul-de-sac. Everything’s a little too charming: from the pet mice that skitter through the frames to the straight-on, photo-album views of the characters, who are shown complete with captions. At this early point, of course, you haven’t begun counting the casualties.

Even within the opening moments, though, you might guess that the pink icing has been layered onto a brick. “Is it our fault?” ask three children, when their father informs them he’s moving out. No, replies Royal Tenenbaum (Gene Hackman), speaking from the very far end of a dining-room table. Then, with a candor that’s as absurd as the table’s utter bareness, he adds, “Of course, your mother and I made some sacrifices to have you.”

What could fill such a paternal void? Etheline Tenenbaum (Anjelica Huston) pumps it full of ambition. Her children must all become geniuses; and so, with a briskness that’s well summed up by the pencil she keeps stuck in her hair, she programs the kids until they’re famous for their success. The effect, again, is only too charming: In quick succession, you see little Chas standing at his desk, running a business empire; little Margot typing away at award-winning plays; little Richie stringing his tennis racket, on the way to the pros at the age of 8. You may smile to see these half-size people behaving like grown-ups; but in that corner of your mind reserved for uncease, you may also wonder whose fantasies they’re living out. Their father (that good-for-nothing) chases after big money, bright lights and the sporting life; and so the children turn themselves into whatever he desires in the big city of Gotham.

Not that anyone in the movie uses that name; but what else can you call this place, where a man can live on credit at the Lindbergh Palace Hotel? The Royal Tenenbaums is set in the romantically dowdy city of John O’Hara’s stories and Charles Foster Kane’s side-street love nest: a New York that, despite being imaginary, has drawn so many millions of real people. It’s here that the movie actually begins, twenty-two years after the parents’ separation, when a broke and aging Royal is evicted from the hotel, and the child prodigies come face to face with the futilities of impending middle age.

Through a combination of lies and sexual longings that I needn’t detail, everyone moves back into the old family house, which still flies a ragged pennant emblazoned with a T. Royal apparently means to reclaim this flagship property, and Etheline with it—goals that can best be achieved, he thinks, if he claims to be dying. Never mind the illogic. (It will reach its height later, in the woozy report of another character: “I wrote a suicide note as soon as I regained consciousness.”) The main point is, Royal takes everyone on a visit to the cemetery, during which sequence each of his offspring unveils a buried injury. We’re reminded in quick succession of how Chas (Ben Stiller) wound up with a BB pellet lodged in his flesh, as a permanent grievance against Royal; how Margot (Gwyneth Paltrow) lost a finger of her right hand, in yet another incident that can be blamed on the father; how Richie (Luke Wilson) played his final, disastrous tennis match, on an afternoon when disillusionment led him to make seventy-two unforced errors. Unlike his siblings, Richie hasn’t bled yet; but he knows how treacherous, how funereal, love can be. It’s a lesson he shares with Etheline’s new suitor, Henry Sherman (Danny Glover), who by this point in the film has proposed marriage and fallen into an open grave.

I shouldn’t make too much of these elements that are literally underground (the film doesn’t); but there they are, underlying the whimsy, which meanwhile keeps your eyes busy with surface effects. They’re clever enough, these effects, such as the reduction of the characters’ wardrobes to a single outfit apiece. Richie still wears his kohl-rimmed eyes, mink coat and little striped dress, comes across like an 11-year-old playing dress-up, or a grown woman pretending to be a little girl. As for Royal, he’s a lounge lizard of the tweed-jacket era, trying to dignify himself with a pair of Henry Kissinger’s eyeglasses—which is to say he’s a disbarred attorney and looks it. And all the while, as you’re occupied with these little conceits, the
film’s geologic strata are shifting into place.

The Royal Tenenbaums is the work of director Wes Anderson, who wrote the screenplay with his regular collaborator, Owen Wilson. Since their previous picture was the utterly brilliant Rushmore, expectations have run high for the Tenenbaums, and disappointments have been voiced. I, too, felt let down at first. The fantasy version of New York City seemed arch to me. (Taxis are always instantly available, and invariably bear the logo of the Gypsy Cab Co. The only place to exercise is the 375th Street Y.) I also wondered whether some of the characters, such as the perpetually pissed-off Chas, were absolutely necessary to the story, and whether the redemption of Royal wasn’t too much of a foregone conclusion. The second viewing hasn’t moved me to play a mug’s game and compare The Royal Tenenbaums to Rushmore; but it has convinced me that a strong imagination is at work in every part of the picture.

The talent is easiest to see in the performances that Anderson has elicited, beginning of course with Gene Hackman’s Royal. He’s a man without an internal censor—whatever pops into his mind comes out of his mouth—who nevertheless tries to con people. A hopeless ambition; yet astonishingly, he has moments of success, which Hackman somehow makes plausible and transparent, sleazy and endearing, in a single gesture. It’s a big performance by a big actor; and it’s matched, paradoxically, by Gwyneth Paltrow’s infinitesimal gestures as Margot. In one of her best scenes, where she’s reunited with Richie after many years’ absence, she almost smiles. Then she doesn’t. That’s it; and it’s enough to make Margot into a booming echo chamber of hurts and longings.

Just as memorable are Luke Wilson, whose Richie tries so hard to be sane and responsible, from within a body that seems anesthetized; Bill Murray as Margot’s husband and father-surrogate, an Oliver Sacks–like neurologist who snickers openly at his weirdo subjects; Danny Glover as the gentlemanly and inept Henry Sherman; and Owen Wilson, who plays the most desperate of the characters and the most successful, the popular novelist Eli Cash. Residents of the imaginary Gotham need someone to supply them with fantasies of other nonplaces, such as the primitive, authentic West. Eli does the job, and pays the cost of having bad mescaline dreams leak out of his head.

It’s clear enough why this theme of

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The Nation.
 dreams and disappointments should appeal to Anderson and Wilson, who themselves achieved a precocious success. You might read *The Royal Tenenbaums* as a film by bright young people who are brooding too much over their next move; and you wouldn’t be wrong. But early triumphs and long slides into mediocrity have long played their part in the myth of Gotham. So, too, has the occasional late redemption.

The second time I watched the *Tenenbaums*, the young-adult archness seemed to me like Eli’s prep-school outfit, which he wears until far too late in life. When you realize why he’s changed it for a preposterous Western get-up—something that only makes him look more like a kid—you understand he should have stayed in the blue blazer. He might not like what it symbolizes, but it suits him.

The whimsy suits *The Royal Tenenbaums*, too. It’s the smile of two filmmakers who seem to feel sad, but can’t hide their delight in what they do. It’s the dirty grin of Gene Hackman, shoplifting his way into your heart.

**FOREVER**

for Donald Revell

Even Death won’t hide the poor fugitive forever; on Doomsday he will learn he must live forever.

Is that nectar the cry of the desert prophets? See angels pour the Word through a sieve forever.

On the gibbet Hallaj cried *I Am the Truth.* In this universe one dies a plaintive forever.

When parents fall in love with those blond assassins, their children sign up for Western Civ forever.

With a brief note he quit the Dead Letter Office—O World, they’ve lost Bartleby’s missive forever.

Am I some Sinai, Moses, for lightning to char? See me solarized, in negative forever.

In the heart’s wild space lies the space of wilderness. What won’t one lose, what home one won’t give forever!

A perfect stranger, he greeted herself in joy—Not to be Tom, how lovely—she said—*I’m Viv forever!* Jamshed, inventor of wine, saw the world in his cup.

Drink, cried his courtiers, for he won’t live forever.

He lives by his wits, wears blue all day, stars all night. Who would have guessed God would be a spiv forever?

Will the Enemy smile as I pass him on the street? I’m still searching for someone to forgive forever.

As landscapes rise like smoke from their eyes, the blind hear God swear by the fig and the olive forever.

The Hangman washes his hands, puts his son to sleep. But for whom, come dawn, he’s decisive forever?

Alone in His Cave—His Dance done—He’s smeared with ash. The Ganges flows from the head of Shiv forever.

You’ve forgiven everyone, Shahid, even God—Then how could someone like you not live forever?

*Agha Shahid Ali*
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ACROSS
1 and 6 Think otherwise? A bad mend is no different if one does! (6,4,4)
10 Releases a prisoner? The length of the habit is more if one does. (4,3)
11 Might one say this to the one with a corkscrew? It’s a big blow to some Midwesterners. (7)
12 A farmer doesn’t need so much pull when this is installed. (7,7)
14 Spruce as a goose if you do? (8)
15 Is she far removed, starting all over? (6)
16 Part of the race runs between two points, as things pass. (6)
18 You ask for it if you expect an itinerary change. (8)
19 What they did to a barrel in the air? (The GI might be asked to do it early.) (4,3)
20 Take to the air when only a portion comes up—though Venus’ s might just be a plant. (7)
21 In Turkey, a part of the bank Arabs look for. (7)
23 It doesn’t necessarily mean something like corn is cut short. (4)

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DOWN
1 What the legendary Jane must have suffered. (Possibly a calm beginning, but a bad site, finally.) (10)
2 Like total disorganization, but that’s where the Lily Maid dwelt! (7)
3 Evidently a successful siege of the city—though it might imply the bonds were put to good usage. (4,10)
4 One may try to put the cap this way. (2,5)
5 It may be legally questionable to do so, like a bad parent. (6)
7 With feeling, as a place to look for a good example of 26-27. (7)
8 One might expect to find it in mending one’s only slightly “cursive” output. (4)
9 What some trippers attempt—in a slightly old-fashioned way. (5,9)
13 A city in Quebec where hers gets broken—broken pointlessly about nothing! (10)
17 Comes to a little railroad, which leads to a sainted town where a lot of women were married, evidently. (7)
19 What they did to a barrel in the air? (The GI might be asked to do it early.) (4,3)
20 Take to the air when only a portion comes up—though Venus’ s might just be a plant. (7)
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A start in show business

Hope's passion, and his first break into show business by performing with the vaudeville circuit as half of a two-man dancing team, playing small-time vaudeville houses. Five years down the road however, would find Hope playing big-time performances, with the most popular acts. He went on to perform on Broadway in rave productions such as "Red, Hot, and Blue", which paved the way for movies, including "The Big Broadcast of 1938". Radio and movies consumed Hope's profession for many years, which proved to be very successful. However, his career did not skyrocket until he began appearing on television. Hope was at the top of the Nielsen ratings for more than 30 years through radio and television. The Guinness Book of Records also cited him as the most honored entertainer in the world, with more than two thousand awards and citations for humanitarian and professional efforts and 54 honorary doctorates under his belt.

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