

## Media

### Who's running the show behind corporate media?

**In the battle over the airwaves, hype and hypocrisy distract us from a free expression crisis**

**By Michelle Chen**

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October 27, 2004—Once upon a time, media ownership was a matter of right and wrong. Because the public airwaves were a precious commodity vulnerable to abuse, the Federal Communications Commission was born to protect them, and the public, through licensing and regulation. Gradually, however, the line between the guardians and foes of free expression has blurred, as both the FCC and the media business have earned unsavory reputations for exploiting their powers.

Today, the information industries jam our airwaves and our synapses with hypnotic melodrama, political scandal and televised war. Behind the scenes of this media wonderland, commerce and government divert public scrutiny by confusing us as to who exactly has taken our attention spans hostage. The FCC, with their "decency standard," is loathed by everyone from shock jocks to provocative feminists as the curmudgeonly thought police. Yet advocates of non-commercial and independent media also vilify the major conglomerates as ruthless purveyors of bad taste and commercial dross.

While settling for the lesser of two evils seems to be a recurring theme in politics lately, the public must choose its enemies wisely. Total deregulation, far from killing censorship, will likely tighten the grip of profit-driven media, allowing commercialism to do an even more thorough job of stifling creativity and civic spirit than the FCC has.

Last year, media lobbyists persuaded the FCC to revise fundamental rules governing ownership, which allowed cross-ownership of stations, expanded the maximum market share for an individual company, and essentially opened local markets to corporate colonization. A federal court suspended the rules in June, but corporations remain undaunted. As new technology expands the television and radio markets, conglomerates continue to claim that deregulation will improve service, lower prices and even inspire more effective, diverse programming. Ironically, their rhetoric rests on the same tenet of freedom that media underdogs accuse corporations of trying to extinguish.

Though behemoths like News Corp and AOL-Time Warner fancy themselves champions of liberty, their deregulation campaign is committed to the free market rather than to free expression. If a quick flip through the prime-time medley—from "Fear Factor" to "Trading Spouses"—offers any indication of the vitality of our civil society, the public should hesitate to trust the major networks with the First Amendment's future.

From the news, you might gather that the martyrs of oppression these days are profanely vile radio host Howard Stern, potty-mouthed NASCAR champion Dale Earnhardt, Jr., and Janet Jackson's nipple, which cost Viacom a \$550,000 penalty (a scathing .003 percent of its yearly revenue).

But all the hype obscures the less photogenic yet much more real victims of a constricted public sphere. You won't hear much about small-town radio stations being swallowed by Clear Channel, which now owns over 1,200 stations nationwide, all graced with shrink-wrapped, formulaic programming. Your daily newspaper won't expose the plight of independent musicians barred from venues and airwaves for not

buying into conglomerate payola schemes—the media mafias that dominate many a local music scene. True, this election season, there might be brief mentions in the headlines about NBC's snubbing advertisements for "Fahrenheit 9/11," or of Sinclair's strategic anti-Kerry programming. But sporadic coverage of high-profile media malfeasance at best reeks of the cannibalism of self-preservation, not an industry raking its own muck.

The steady evaporation of standards and the rise of sensationalism and spin have led most Americans to lose both faith and interest in mainstream journalism, according to numerous surveys. The biggest story not to make the papers is the unraveling of a fundamental organ of democratic participation—a sadly predictable phenomenon when the majority of the nationwide daily newspaper circulation is the captive audience of 10 companies. The unique challenge behind the media ownership problem is that the conduits for raising awareness are themselves managed by the corporate media complex, which has the wealth and political mojo to monopolize the flow of information—literally, to produce the news.

Once again dumbing down the public discourse, mainstream media have distorted the censorship issue into a deceptively one-dimensional debate: absolute deregulation versus FCC dictatorship. In reality, deregulation will not give underrepresented groups free and equal access to the airwaves. The dominant corporations will simply replace the FCC as the chief enforcer of political and cultural homogeneity. This isn't exactly a changing of the guard, either; the FCC and their client companies have always had a healthy business relationship. Since 1995, FCC officials have been buttered up with \$2.8 million in free trips to Vegas and other perks, mainly courtesy of industry groups lobbying for looser rules, according to the Center for Public Integrity. The recent official crackdown on "indecentcy" not only provides great fluff for the nightly news; it cleverly masks the collusion of government interest and corporate interest against the public interest.

Stern's persecution and Jackson's costly exposure have spun a fantastic fable, portraying bickering within the establishment as a struggle over the First Amendment. The real story is messier, because the bad guy has more than one name. Outright censorship in the name of "decency" is just as dangerous as clandestine restriction of free expression in the name of profit.

The public should not just be annoyed at government overreaction against "profanity" on our television screens. It should be outraged at government inaction toward the systematic assault on free expression by big business. If they succeed in keeping the audience in the dark, the FCC and their industry partners may continue their reign happily ever after. But if we refuse to be duped, we can salvage and reconstruct our public sphere, and empower the people to take center stage again in the future of mass communication.

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