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Editorial: Media and democracy

An editorial
March 5, 2005

James Madison warned more than two centuries ago, "A popular government without popular information or the means of acquiring it is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy or perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance, and a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power knowledge gives."

Madison wrote those words in the first years of the 19th century, but they still ring true in the first years of the 21st.


American media have become a cesspool of political spin, product placement and celebrity gossip. Popular information that matters, and the means of acquiring it, is being choked off by the handful of corporations that have come to control the vast majority of American broadcast and print communications. And the consolidation of media ownership - about which the founder of this newspaper, William T. Evjue, began warning in 1917 - is growing dramatically more problematic.

In other words, Madison is being proven right as we watch and listen and read media that serve the interests of the powerful and wealthy while denying the vast majority of American citizens the power that knowledge gives. The tragedy is evident in a war that was sold as both easy and necessary but that continues to claim Iraqi and American lives and that is emptying the public treasury of the funds that should pay for schools, health care and other basic needs. The farce is evident in the Bush presidency, which continues despite the evidence of deceit, mismanagement and a worldview so warped that it has made America a more hated country than at any time in her history.


If America had better media, we would have a better president. And we would not be stuck in the quagmire that is Iraq.

A growing number of Americans realize this fact. And they are not waiting for communications corporations to create those better media. They are seeking it out themselves. Many have discovered Amy Goodman's national news program, "Democracy Now," which airs locally on WORT/FM and WYOU Community Television.

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Amy Goodman



Goodman and her staff refer to themselves as the exception to the rulers, and they boldly challenge the official spin from the White House and the corporate public relations agencies that has come to define so much of the news. You won't hear a lot about Michael Jackson's trial on "Democracy Now." Rather, you will hear the inside story of the war profiteering in Iraq, the Bush administration's scheming to privatize Social Security, and trade policies that put Americans out of work and impoverish developing countries.

Goodman offers serious news about issues that matter - the kind of information that citizens need to arm themselves with for the serious work of governing themselves. And the response to her program - which is now broadcast on more than 300 stations nationwide - proves that Americans want more than government spin and gossip from their media. But Goodman isn't done working to build better media.

She'll be in Madison tonight at a 7'oclock event at the Barrymore Theater, 2090 Atwood Ave., to help spread the word about Free Speech TV, the nation's progressive television network. The event will benefit the Madison Campaign for Free Speech on Cable TV, which is currently working to get Free Speech TV added to the menu of local cable television offerings through Charter Communications. (For more information and to join the campaign, visit cable.freespeech.org.)

We welcome Amy Goodman as an ally in the struggle not merely to build an alternative to corporate media but to put an end to the tragedy and farce of this dark passage and to build a democracy where citizens armed with the power that knowledge gives - rather than the feudal serfs of corporate power - will define the discourse.

Published: 7:39 AM 3/5/05

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