



# EDITORIALS / OPINION

Home delivery  
Contact us  
Your account

Traffic | Weather | Today's news index

Movies | Restaurants | Today's events

- Home
- Local
- Nation / World
- Politics
- Business / Tech
- Editorials / Opinion
- Eric Devericks
- STop blog
- Columnists
- Sports
- Entertainment
- Comics / Games
- Living
- Pacific Northwest Magazine
- Travel / Outdoors
- Consumer
- Health
- Education
- Obituaries
- Special Projects
- Photojournalism
- Corrections
- Archive
- Alerts / E-mails
- NWclassifieds
- Jobs
- Autos
- Real estate
- Rentals
- NWsource
- Personals
- Shopping
- Services
- Your account
- Contact us
- Submit listings
- Send us news tips
- Seattle Times store
- Advertise with us
- RSS feeds
- Wireless
- Home delivery
- Today's front page

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Guest columnists

## Why media ownership matters

By Amy Goodman and David Goodman  
*Special to The Times*

George Bush must have been delighted to learn from a recent Washington Post-ABC News poll that 56 percent of Americans still think Iraq had weapons of mass destruction before the start of the war, while six in 10 said they believe Iraq provided direct support to the al-Qaida terrorist network — notions that have long since been thoroughly debunked by everyone from the U.S. Senate Intelligence Committee to both of Bush's handpicked weapons inspectors, Charles Duelfer and David Kay.

Americans believe these lies not because they are stupid, but because they are good media consumers. Our media have become an echo chamber for those in power. Rather than challenge the fraudulent claims of the Bush administration, we've had a media acting as a conveyor belt for the government's lies.

As the Pentagon has learned, deploying the American media is more powerful than any bomb. The explosive effect is amplified as a few pro-war, pro-government media moguls consolidate their grip over the majority of news outlets. Media monopoly and militarism go hand in hand.

When it comes to issues of war and peace, the results of having a compliant media are as deadly to our democracy as they are to our soldiers. Why do the corporate media cheerlead for war? One answer lies in the corporations themselves — the ones that own the major news outlets.

At the time of the first Persian Gulf War, CBS was owned by Westinghouse and NBC by General Electric. Two of the major nuclear weapons manufacturers owned two of the major networks. Westinghouse and GE made most of the parts for many of the weapons in the Persian Gulf War. It was no surprise, then, that much of the coverage on those networks looked like a military hardware show.

We see reporters in the cockpits of war planes, interviewing pilots about how it feels to be at the controls. We almost never see journalists at the target end, asking people huddled in their homes what it feels like not to know what the next moment will bring.

The media have a responsibility to show the true face of war. It is bloody. It is brutal. Real people die. Women and children are killed. Families are wiped



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### Forum

**Amy Goodman** was scheduled to be a panelist on the American Voices

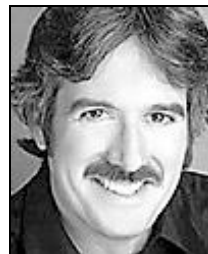
out; villages are razed. If the media would show for one week the same unsanitized images of war that the rest of the world sees, people in the U.S. would say no, that war is not an answer to conflict in the 21st century.

Forum, "All the News that's Fit to Own; Who Controls the Media and Why We Should Care," Saturday night at the Paramount Theater. The Glaser Progress Foundation provided support for the forum, and The Seattle Times was a media partner.

But we don't see the real images of war. We don't need government censors, because we have corporations sanitizing the news. A study released last month by American University's School of Communications revealed that media outlets acknowledged they self-censored their reporting on the Iraq invasion out of concerns about public reaction to graphic images and content.

The media organizations in charge of vetting our images of war have become fewer and bigger — and the news more uniform and gung ho. Six huge corporations now control the major U.S. media: Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation (FOX, HarperCollins, New York Post, Weekly Standard, TV Guide, DirecTV and 35 TV stations), General Electric (NBC, CNBC, MSNBC, Telemundo, Bravo, Universal Pictures and 28 TV stations), Time Warner (AOL, CNN, Warner Bros., Time and its 130-plus magazines), Disney (ABC, Disney Channel, ESPN, 10 TV and 72 radio stations), Viacom (CBS, MTV, Nickelodeon, Paramount Pictures, Simon & Schuster and 183 U.S. radio stations), and Bertelsmann (Random House and its more than 120 imprints worldwide, and Gruner + Jahr and its more than 110 magazines in 10 countries).

As Phil Donahue, the former host of MSNBC's highest-rated show who was fired by the network in February 2003 for bringing on anti-war voices, told "Democracy Now!," "We have more [TV] outlets now, but most of them sell the Bowflex machine. The rest of them are Jesus and jewelry. There really isn't diversity in the media anymore. Dissent? Forget about it."



David Goodman

The lack of diversity in ownership helps explain the lack of diversity in the news. When George W. Bush first came to power, the media watchers Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) looked at who appeared on the evening news on ABC, CBS and NBC. Ninety-two percent of all U.S. sources interviewed were white, 85 percent were male, and where party affiliation was identifiable, 75 percent were Republican.

In the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, there was even less diversity of opinion on the airwaves. During the critical two weeks before and after Colin Powell's speech to the United Nations where he made his case for war, FAIR found that just three out of 393 sources — fewer than 1 percent — were affiliated with anti-war activism.

Three out of almost 400 interviews. And that was on the "respectable" evening news shows of CBS, NBC, ABC and PBS.

These are not media that are serving a democratic society, where a diversity of views is vital to shaping informed opinions. This is a well-oiled propaganda machine that is repackaging government spin and passing it off as journalism.

For the media moguls, even this parody of political "diversity" is too much. So as Gen. Colin Powell led the war on Iraq, his son, Michael Powell, chairman of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), led the war on

diversity of voices at home.

In the spring of 2003, Michael Powell tried to hand over the airwaves and newspapers to fewer and fewer tycoons by further loosening restrictions on how many media outlets a single company could own. Powell tried to scrap 30-year-old rules that limited the reach of any television network to no more than 35 percent of the national population, and limits on cross-ownership that, for example, prevented newspapers from buying television or radio stations in the same city. The new rules would have allowed a broadcast network to buy up stations that together reached 45 percent of the national population.

The attack on the existing media-ownership rules came from predictable corners: Both Viacom, which owns CBS, and Rupert Murdoch's conservative FOX News Channel were already in violation, and would be forced to sell off stations to come into compliance with the 35-percent limit. The rule change would enable Murdoch to control the airwaves of entire cities. That would be fine with Bush and the Powells, since Murdoch is one of their biggest boosters.

Murdoch declared in February 2003 that George W. Bush "will either go down in history as a very great president or he'll crash and burn. I'm optimistic it will be the former by a ratio of 2 to 1." Murdoch leaves nothing to chance: His FOX News Channel is doing all it can to help.

It looked like Powell, backed by the Bush White House and with Republican control of Congress, would have no trouble ramming through these historic rule changes. The broadcast industry left nothing to chance: Between 1998 and 2004, broadcasters spent a boggling \$249 million lobbying the federal government, including spending \$27 million on federal candidates and lawmakers.

This would normally be called bribery. At the FCC, it's just business as usual.

You would think that FCC deregulation, affecting millions of Americans, would get major play in the media. But the national networks knew that if people found out about how one media mogul could own nearly everything you watch, hear and read in a city, there would be revolt. The solution for them was simple: They just didn't cover the issue for a year. The only thing the networks did was to join together — and you thought they were competitors? — in a brief filed with the FCC to call for media deregulation.

And then, something remarkable happened: Media activists — an unlikely coalition of liberals and conservatives — mounted a national campaign to defeat Powell and stop the corporate sell-off. The FCC received 2 million letters and e-mails, most of them opposing the sell-off. The Prometheus Radio Project, a grass-roots media activism group, sued to stop the sale of our airwaves, and won in federal court last June. These are hopeful signals that the days of backroom deals by media titans are numbered.

Powell announced his resignation as chairman of the FCC in January. Arguably the worst FCC chairman in history, Powell led with singular zeal the effort to auction off the public airwaves to the highest corporate bidder. In so doing, he did us all a favor: For a brief moment, he pulled back the covers on the incestuous world of media ownership to expose the corruption and rot for all to see.

Kevin Martin, Bush's newly appointed FCC chairman, will, according to an FCC insider, be even worse than Powell. Leading conservative and right-wing religious groups have been quietly lobbying the White House for Martin

to chair the FCC. Martin voted with Powell on key regulations favoring media consolidation, and in addition has been a self-appointed indecency czar. The indecency furor conveniently grabs headlines and pushes for the regulation of content, while Martin and the media moguls plan sweetheart deregulation deals to achieve piecemeal what they couldn't push through all at once. This is the true indecency afflicting media today.

The major media conglomerates are among the most powerful on the planet. The onrush of digital convergence and broadband access in the workplaces and homes of America will radically change the way we work, play and communicate. Fiber-to-the-premise (FTTP) from the regional Bells, Voice over IP (VoIP) telephony, bundled services from cable companies, and increased capacity in satellite and wireless technologies will transform the platforms on which we communicate.

Who owns these platforms, what is delivered over them and, fundamentally, in whose interest they work are critical issues before us now. Given the wealth of the media companies and their shrewd donations into our political process, the advocates for the public interest are in far too short a supply.

A blow against media ownership consolidation — now or in the future — will have far-reaching implications, as critical information gains exposure to a caring, active public. Instead of fake reality TV, maybe the media will start to cover the reality of people struggling to get by and of the victories that happen every day in our communities, and in strife-torn regions around the globe.

When people get information, they are empowered. We have to ensure that the airwaves are open for more of that. Our motto at "Democracy Now!" is to break the sound barrier. We call ourselves the exception to the rulers. We believe all media should be.

*Amy Goodman, host of the award-winning radio and TV news show "Democracy Now!," and her brother David Goodman, a contributing writer for Mother Jones, are authors of "The Exception to the Rulers: Exposing Oily Politicians, War Profiteers, and the Media That Love Them," which was just released in paperback by Hyperion.*

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