

Danny Schechter

The Media War at a Time of Terror

Looking for Light in Darkness

I am an optimist by nature, and so, as I arrive in the open arms of Ars Electronica, I would like to take singer Bobby McFerrin's advice to heart and "don't worry, be happy." But I can't do that easily when so many burdens of the larger world weigh so heavily on those of us who are covering the terrors of terror wars.

I am a media person who has become a media warrior—a journalist conscious of the limits of journalism, and eager to improve a media industry I have been part of for decades.

We are living at a time of media war, a war between media competitors and the public they serve, a conflict between those who embrace the media status quo and want to rise within it, and those, like myself, who would reverse its priorities and change its trajectory. As this crisis in communications both takes on permanency and seems more urgent than ever, I want to rededicate myself to the battle—a battle that already has taken longer than Mao's Long March.

For decades now, I have been marching, as the late German activist Rudi Dutschke once put it, "through the institutions." From student publications to maverick magazines. From the Liberation News Service to alternative radio. From dissecting radio news on the commercial spectrum to local on-air TV reporting and producing. From local TV to Cable News networking. From the start up of CNN to producing for ABC's network's prime time news magazine "20/20."

And then, this insider became an outsider again in the mid-1980s, when I "defected" from the mainstream into the margins, the volatile world of independent production. Ever since, along with making TV shows and films, I've been writing books, making speeches, panelizing and columnizing, and for the last two years, MediaChanneling. At heart I am a media maker, committed to covering underreported stories and offering more diverse perspectives.

And I want my work read and seen, and my often-dissident voice heard. At first, it seemed like "cool running" (a Jamaican Rasta expression), as I became part of clubs that I was surprised would have me as a member. I worked my way into the media in influential places, but once in, getting my perspective heard was even harder. Wouldn't you know it? There was more than a small problem in the way. It's called the media system, a consolidating and interwoven ganglia of big corporate combines that tend to be at each other's throats but who also tend to think and act the same way. They effectively monopolize the means of communication, and along with it the marketplace of ideas. Fifty of them controlled the U.S. media 10 years ago. Now it's down to 10.

My system-questioning instincts were soon at odds with the largely uncritical system-supporting mission of media outlets.

I wanted to make a change and a difference. They believe if it ain't broke (in their terms), why fix it?

I identified with the aspirations of media heroes like the late I. F. Stone, who defined his goals in these terms: "To give a little comfort to the oppressed, to write the truth exactly as I saw it, to make no compromises other than those of quality imposed by my own inadequacies ..."

That's one agenda. But by its very nature, it challenges the ethos and values of many of those on the inside of the media system. They want to make money more than make media. For them, making media is primarily a means to making money.

Impossible Dream?

To give these devils their due, these companies and their networks do often disseminate engaging programming while in pursuit of their bottom lines. And they know how to build and hold audiences. Mass audiences. They excel at marketing themselves and those that sponsor their programming. They know how to package "product" in ways that are often seductive and influential, even illuminating. They also offer us a window onto the world they want us to know about. The problem is that their world is often worlds apart from the one I want to know about or tell people about.

To add broader views requires building a constituency for holding media accountable. It means lobbying for regulation in the public interest, and the validity of the idea of the public interest itself.

Is this some impossible dream?

My feelings about what's achievable go back and forth like alternate sides of the street parking in New York City. On Mondays and Thursdays, I am on the left side tilting at the windmills, trying to speak my truths to power. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, I am on the other side, realizing the limits and justifying the time spent in terms of a larger duty but without feeling I have much of a chance of breaking through. My hunch is that most wannabe media reformers feel this way. We are driven by our anger and critical values. Fortunately, many of us don't get disillusioned because we have few illusions to start with.

On the other hand (always that other hand), "history happens" and nothing stays the same. In my career, I covered and was supportive of movements that toppled segregation, ended apartheid and helped end the US war in Vietnam. All of those outcomes seemed impossible at the beginning. In the end conscious people did make a difference.

And so it is with this media war. Power always seems permanent—until it fragments, cracks, loses credibility and arouses opposition. And so I ask:

Who determined that 10 companies should control the media?
Who elected Rupert Murdoch media emperor? (The answer is 126 banks!)

Who decided that TimeWarnerAOL has a right to control the Internet?
Who gave NBCCBSVIACOMABCDISNEY the means to run the US TV networks and decide what we should and shouldn't know?

Not I.

And not you either.

What will it take for folks to realize that programming is a verb as well as a noun, and that all around the world there are overlooked people with lots to say, report and propose. Today's central story line is a global and still unfolding one.

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Let me take you back to an event that shook me—and the world. The events of September 11, 2001.

I was online in our Times Square Office a few miles away from what we now know as “Ground Zero” when that first plane out of Boston smashed into the World Trade Center. Like everyone else, we scrambled for information. Our TV set was broken so we turned to the web, and caught the first bulletin and photo on CNN.com. Like so many others we thought there had been an accident but the beautiful and clear weather was puzzling.

We all know what happened next, and how heroically and feverishly the news business leapt into action. After all, this catastrophe occurred in the epicenter of the world’s leading “media city,” across the street from “The Street,” the offices of the NY Stock Exchange on the one side and the *Wall Street Journal* on the other. The attack on the twin towers attacked the media directly, toppling buildings literally wired as transmission points for most TV signals and striking a costly blow at the infrastructure of telecommunications. As the unthinkable occurred, as the twin towers plunged into rubble, every news organization went on alert and into overdrive. The results of that collective work product was soon there for the world to see, hear and read. The millions of Americans who had tuned out of news, many turned off by its sensationalism and simplicity were soon back, glued to the TV sets and other news outlets. Newspapers couldn’t print enough copies to meet the demand. We all wanted to know what happened, and all needed to try to process its impact. Soon, a U.S. news system that had in many ways abandoned the world, and issues like the threat of terror attacks, was playing catch up with around the clock coverage of what was soon labeled “The Attack on America,” and the government’s response.

Soon, questions were raised about who was responsible. The focus was on the terrorist threat as it should have been. But slowly other issues surfaced: how did our 344 billion dollar defense and intelligence establishment miss the signals, and fall down on the job?

Soon our own company had joined the media frenzy on a few fronts, shooting and editing stories for RAI Television in Italy, and by launching a new online Globalvision News Network (www.gvnews.net.) offering stories from independent news outlets worldwide in an effort to bring local and more diverse voices to audiences that have been conditioned to rely on a narrow range of Anglo-American inflected news. We are seeking to disseminate this “inside-out” coverage to news consumers who, until now, rely on the traditional outside-in approach for their international coverage.

This initiative grew out of an examination of media trends that we felt are shortchanging the public, and eroding democracy worldwide. We are hardly alone in rejecting the dumbing down of news and the pervasive withdrawal of world coverage that has reached epidemic proportions in many news outlets for many years. Many in the media business don’t even recognize the scale of this problem. Pulitzer Prize winning media writer David Shaw reported in *The Los Angeles Times*, “Coverage of international news by the U.S. media has declined significantly in recent years in response to corporate demands for larger profits and an increasingly fragmented audience. Having decided that readers and viewers in post-Cold War America cared more about celebrities, scandals and local news, newspaper editors and television news executives have reduced the space and time devoted to foreign coverage by 70 to 80 percent during the past 15 to 20 years.”

Long before September 11, my colleagues and I were alarmed by the consequences of this media-led isolationism which feeds, on the one hand, public ignorance of the world, and on the other, a lack of empathy towards the world's poor and dispossessed. We realized that there was more than a digital divide between developed and developing countries. There was and is a divide of consciousness, much of it at least partially the result of our media diet. International observers have long been aware of this, even though many Americans are blissfully in the dark even as the problem is right in front of us every day. Long ago Marshall McLuhan, called television an environment that is "pervasively invisible," affecting us all in ways that most of us don't even recognize. As propaganda analyst Ed Herman puts it, U.S. citizens by and large are caught within the epistemic bind of *not knowing that they do not know*.

Perhaps this is why journalists in other countries write articles with titles like "Americans Just Don't Get It." The Indian writer Arundhati Roy links US policies overseas to US media power at home: "I think people are the product of the information they receive [...] the information is so edited [...] I think even more powerful than America's military arsenal has been its hold over the media in some way. I find that very frightening [...] just as much as America believes in freedom at home, or free speech, or the freedom of religion, outside it believes in the freedom to humiliate, the freedom to export terror, and the freedom to humiliate, which is a very important thing because that's what really leads to the rage."

Agree with her or not, there is no denying that most of us are confused about why us, why would *they* launch such a terror attack on our country. "I think most Americans are clueless when it comes to the politics and ideology and religion in [the Muslim] world and, in that sense, I think we do bear some responsibility," says Martin Baron, editor of the *Boston Globe*, "in consequence, we are not only less informed about what's happening in the world but about how others see us."

We believe this problem is not one to simply whine about or decry—but to take seriously and to respond to. And that is precisely what I have been doing since September 11th, as the Executive Editor of a unique independent experiment in global journalism, *Mediachannel.org*, an international media online portal which aspires to watch the media as it watches the world. The *Media Channel*, now in its second year is a not-for-profit public interest website drawing from around 1000 affiliates, making us the largest online media issues network in the world. The idea is to provide media news, analysis, criticism, research and discussion from monitors, observers, journalists, commentators and critics who recognize the key role media plays in an age of globalization. Our goal is work with our colleagues throughout the world, not simply ON them in the manner of most US media outlets.

If you visit the site, you will find a wide array of stories, columns resources, issue guides, and forums that feature media related input from the mainstream and the margins, from well known big names and young upstarts. I had been writing a column weekly under my media nom de guerre "The News Dissector" harking back to my decade-long on-air stint as the news director and "News Dissector" at WBCN in Boston in the seventies. It is a title I took and one that stuck.

Once the war began, I wrote daily thanks to the availability of a new weblog technology that led me to post a column on media coverage of the crisis based on our network, and information and links provided by our readers/users who "hit" the site in the millions. I am sure I got carried away, just pouring it on with 3000 words a day (Yes, I

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know that is an indulgence but one the times demand). But the vocal response eered in by many and the spurt in traffic confirmed to us that there is a market and an audience for the critical independent/alternative/insider content mix we offer.

Our approach is geared not just to dump on the media but to improve coverage. One example is the participation of a new group called Reporting the World based in England which literally shows how the same story can just as easily be produced from a conflict resolution oriented "peace journalism" approach as the traditional bombs and bodycount oriented "war journalism." In all cases we try to offer what we think is the largest media failure—context, interpretation and background. This means a more diverse focus on interests as well as issues. We also try to look at how other news outlets in other countries are carrying the same story, noting that cultural bias and parochialism are hardly a problem that is made in the USA.

We are very eager to broaden our reach by networking with the many talented and concerned people whose expertise and experience would deepen the work we do. We want to do more to convey the realities that journalists have of working with institutional pressures that sometimes encourage self-censorship.

We have been thrilled that senior journalists like Walter Cronkite have lent their support. Our Globalvision New Media board is headed by James R. Rosenfield, who ran the CBS Television Network for a decade.

The fact remains that many of us don't "get it" because most U.S. media companies won't do their job and give us a nuanced view of the world. While, thanks to the Internet, many diverse sources of information are available, mainstream media are still the main source of news and explanation for most citizens.

And that media have not changed all that much. Despite the media mantra that the "world changed forever" the media in the end did not change that much. As the "Project on Excellence in Journalism" reported after an extensive survey:

Despite the war on terrorism and conflict in the Middle East, the news Americans see on network television has softened considerably since last fall, to the point that it now looks more like it did before the terrorist attacks than immediately after, according to a new study.

Celebrity and lifestyle coverage, which last fall had all but vanished from evening news and was subordinated even in morning news, has returned to levels close to those of last summer, according to the study by the Project for Excellence in Journalism.

Traditional hard news, meanwhile, has shrunk, reestablishing a trend toward the softening of network news evident since the late 1970s.

There are any number of crucial issues swirling around the current world situation. The problem is that these debates are still flying below the radar of most mainstream media outlets.

This is a time when all views should be reported, discussed and debated. We need to deepen our global conversation. We need more investigations. And we need more diverse voices in the news and more open-mindedness about what should be covered by the news.

The media have a major role to play in reminding us all of the many ways in which our lives are entwined and futures interconnected worldwide. Ostriches can put their heads in the sand. Journalists no longer can.

MediaChannel.org started with 20 affiliates. We now have 993. The hits are mul-

LOCAL CONFLICTS—GLOBAL MEDIA

tipling. Interest is growing. Three years ago *MediaChannel* was just an idea. Now it is a vibrant resource for research, diverse views, suppressed news, advocates, activists and journalists.

Can we keep going? Can we learn how to be effective and prevail in our war of ideas? Can those of us who want change and a just public interest work together across boundaries and borders to create a media that is worthy of a just world? This is a dark time. It is a time of terror, of political pessimism and for many, of personal paralysis.

It is also a time to look for light.

In that pursuit I am comforted and inspired by the empowering truth in these words of James Baldwin, an American writer of color and consciousness

One discovers the light in darkness; that is what darkness is for, but everything in our lives depends on how to bear the light. It is necessary, while in darkness, to know that there is a light somewhere, to know that in oneself, there is a light waiting to be found. What the light reveals is danger, and what it demands is faith.

