

Our Democracy is in Danger of Being Paralyzed

Address to the National Conference on Media Reform, Madison, Wisconsin
By Bill Moyers – November 2003

Thank you for inviting me tonight. I'm flattered to be speaking to a gathering as high-powered as this one that's come together with an objective as compelling as "media reform." I must confess, however, to a certain discomfort, shared with other journalists, about the very term "media." Ted Gup, who teaches journalism at Case Western Reserve, articulated my concerns better than I could when he wrote in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (November 23, 2001) that the very concept of media is insulting to some of us within the press who find ourselves lumped in with so many disparate elements, as if everyone with a pen, a microphone, a camera, or just a loud voice were all one and the same. David Broder is not Matt Drudge. *Meet the Press* is not *Temptation Island*. And I am not Jerry Springer. I do not speak for him. He does not speak for me. Yet 'the media' speaks for us all.

That's how I felt when I saw Oliver North reporting on Fox from Iraq, pressing our embattled troops to respond to his repetitive and belittling question, "Does Fox Rock? Does Fox Rock?" Oliver North and I may be in the same "media" but we are not part of the same message. Nonetheless, I accept that I work and all of us live in "medialand," and God knows we need some "media reform." I'm sure you know those two words are really an incomplete description of the job ahead. Taken alone, they suggest that you've assembled a convention of efficiency experts, tightening the bolts and boosting the output of the machinery of public enlightenment, or else a conclave of high-minded do-gooders applauding each other's sermons. But we need to be – and we will be – much more than that. Because what we're talking about is nothing less than rescuing a democracy that is so polarized it is in danger of being paralyzed and pulverized.

Alarming words, I know. But the realities we face should trigger alarms. Free and responsible government by popular consent just can't exist without an informed public. That's a cliché, I know, but I agree with the presidential candidate who once said that truisms are true and clichés mean what they say (an observation that no doubt helped to lose him the election.) It's a reality: democracy can't exist without an informed public. Here's an example: Only 13% of eligible young people cast ballots in the last presidential election. A recent National Youth Survey revealed that only half of the fifteen hundred young people polled believe that voting is important, and only 46% think they can make a difference in solving community problems. We're talking here about one quarter of the electorate. The Carnegie Corporation conducted a youth challenge quiz of 15-24 year-olds and asked them, "Why don't more young people vote or get involved?" Of the nearly two thousand respondents, the main answer was that they did not have enough information about issues and candidates. Let me rewind and say it again: democracy can't exist without an informed public. So I say without qualification that it's not simply the cause of journalism that's at stake today, but the cause of American liberty itself. As Tom Paine put it, "The sun never shined on a cause of greater worth." He was talking about the cause of a revolutionary America in 1776. But that revolution ran in good part on the energies of a rambunctious, though tiny press. Freedom and freedom of communications were birth-twins in the future United States. They grew up together, and neither has fared very well in the other's absence. Boom times for the one have been boom times for the other.

Yet today, despite plenty of lip service on every ritual occasion to freedom of the press radio and TV, three powerful forces are undermining that very freedom, damming the streams of significant public interest news that irrigate and nourish the flowering of self-determination. The first of these is the centuries-old reluctance of governments – even elected governments – to operate in the sunshine of disclosure and criticism. The second is more subtle and more recent. It's the tendency of media giants, operating on big-business principles, to exalt commercial values at the expense of democratic value. That is, to run what Edward R. Murrow forty-five years ago called broadcasting's "money-making machine" at full throttle. In so doing they are squeezing out the journalism that tries to get as close as possible to the verifiable truth; they are isolating serious coverage of

public affairs into ever-dwindling “news holes” or far from prime-time; and they are gobbling up small and independent publications competing for the attention of the American people.

It’s hardly a new or surprising story. But there are fresh and disturbing chapters.

In earlier times our governing bodies tried to squelch journalistic freedom with the blunt instruments of the law – padlocks for the presses and jail cells for outspoken editors and writers. Over time, with spectacular wartime exceptions, the courts and the Constitution struck those weapons out of their hands. But they’ve found new ones now, in the name of “national security.” The classifier’s Top Secret stamp, used indiscriminately, is as potent a silencer as a writ of arrest. And beyond what is officially labeled “secret” there hovers a culture of sealed official lips, opened only to favored media insiders: of government by leak and innuendo and spin, of misnamed “public information” offices that churn out blizzards of releases filled with self-justifying exaggerations and, occasionally, just plain damned lies. Censorship without officially appointed censors.

Add to that the censorship-by-omission of consolidated media empires digesting the bones of swallowed independents, and you’ve got a major shrinkage of the crucial information that thinking citizens can act upon. People saw that coming as long as a century ago when the rise of chain newspaper ownerships, and then of concentration in the young radio industry, became apparent. And so in the zesty progressivism of early New Deal days, the Federal Communications Act of 1934 was passed (more on this later.) The aim of that cornerstone of broadcast policy, mentioned over 100 times in its pages, was to promote the “public interest, convenience and necessity.” The clear intent was to prevent a monopoly of commercial values from overwhelming democratic values – to assure that the official view of reality – corporate or government – was not the only view of reality that reached the people. Regulators and regulated, media and government were to keep a wary eye on each other, preserving those checks and balances that is the bulwark of our Constitutional order.

What would happen, however, if the contending giants of big government and big publishing and broadcasting ever joined hands? Ever saw eye to eye in putting the public’s need for news second to free-market economics? That’s exactly what’s happening now under the ideological banner of “deregulation.” Giant megamedia conglomerates that our founders could not possibly have envisioned are finding common cause with an imperial state in a betrothal certain to produce not the sons and daughters of liberty but the very kind of bastards that issued from the old arranged marriage of church and state.

Consider where we are today.

Never has there been an administration so disciplined in secrecy, so precisely in lockstep in keeping information from the people at large and – in defiance of the Constitution – from their representatives in Congress. Never has the so powerful a media oligopoly – the word is Barry Diller’s, not mine – been so unabashed in reaching like Caesar for still more wealth and power. Never have hand and glove fitted together so comfortably to manipulate free political debate, sow contempt for the idea of government itself, and trivialize the people’s need to know. When the journalist-historian Richard Reeves was once asked by a college student to define “real news”, he answered: “The news you and I need to keep our freedoms.” When journalism throws in with power that’s the first news marched by censors to the guillotine. The greatest moments in the history of the press came not when journalists made common cause with the state but when they stood fearlessly independent of it.

Which brings me to the third powerful force – beyond governmental secrecy and megamedia conglomerates – that is shaping what Americans see, read, and hear. I am talking now about that quasi-official partisan press ideologically linked to an authoritarian administration that in turn is the ally and agent of the most powerful interests in the world. This convergence dominates the marketplace of political ideas today in a phenomenon unique in our history. You need not harbor the notion of a vast, right wing conspiracy to think this more collusion more than pure coincidence. Conspiracy is unnecessary when ideology hungers for power and its many adherents swarm of their own accord to the same pot of honey. Stretching from the editorial pages of the Wall Street Journal to the faux news of Rupert Murdoch’s empire to the nattering nabobs of no-nothing radio to

a legion of think tanks paid for and bought by conglomerates – the religious, partisan and corporate right have raised a mighty megaphone for sectarian, economic, and political forces that aim to transform the egalitarian and democratic ideals embodied in our founding documents. Authoritarianism. With no strong opposition party to challenge such triumphalist hegemony, it is left to journalism to be democracy's best friend. That is why so many journalists joined with you in questioning Michael Powell's bid – blessed by the White House – to permit further concentration of media ownership. If free and independent journalism committed to telling the truth without fear or favor is suffocated, the oxygen goes out of democracy. And there is a surer way to intimidate and then silence mainstream journalism than to be the boss.

If you doubt me, read Jane Kramer's chilling account in the current New Yorker of Silvio Berlusconi. The Prime Minister of Italy is its richest citizen. He is also its first media mogul. The list of media that he or his relatives or his proxies own, or directly or indirectly control, includes the state television networks and radio stations, three of Italy's four commercial television networks, two big publishing houses, two national newspapers, fifty magazines, the country's largest movie production-and-distribution company, and a chunk of its Internet services. Even now he is pressing upon parliament a law that would enable him to purchase more media properties, including the most influential paper in the country. Kramer quotes one critic who says that half the reporters in Italy work for Berlusconi, and the other half think they might have to. Small wonder he has managed to put the Italian State to work to guarantee his fortune – or that his name is commonly attached to such unpleasant things as contempt for the law, conflict of interest, bribery, and money laundering. Nonetheless, "his power over what other Italians see, read, buy, and, above all, think, is overwhelming." The editor of The Economist, Bill Emmott, was asked recently why a British magazine was devoting so much space to an Italian Prime Minister. He replied that Berlusconi had betrayed the two things the magazine stood for: capitalism and democracy. Can it happen here? It can happen here. By the way, Berlusconi's close friend is Rupert Murdoch. On July 31st this year, writes Jane Kramer, programming on nearly all the satellite hookups in Italy was switched automatically to Murdoch's Sky Italia.

So the issues bringing us here tonight are bigger and far more critical than simply "media reform." That's why, before I go on, I want to ask you to look around you. I'm serious: Look to your left and now to your right. You are looking at your allies in one of the great ongoing struggles of the American experience – the struggle for the soul of democracy, for government "of, by, and for the people."

It's a battle we can win only if we work together. We've seen that this year. Just a few months ago the FCC, heavily influenced by lobbyists for the newspaper, broadcasting and cable interests, prepared a relaxation of the rules governing ownership of media outlets that would allow still more diversity-killing mergers among media giants. The proceedings were conducted in virtual secrecy, and generally ignored by all the major media, who were of course interested parties. In June Chairman Powell and his two Republican colleagues on the FCC announced the revised regulations as a done deal.

But they didn't count on the voice of independent journalists and citizens like you. Because of coverage in independent outlets – including PBS, which was the only broadcasting system that encouraged its journalists to report what was really happening – and because citizens like you took quick action, this largely invisible issue burst out as a major political cause and ignited a crackling public debate. You exposed Powell's failure to conduct an open discussion of the rule changes save for a single hearing in Richmond, Virginia. Your efforts led to a real participatory discussion, with open meetings in Chicago, Seattle, San Francisco, New York and Atlanta. Then the organizing that followed generated millions of letters and "filings" at the FCC opposing the change. Finally, the outcry mobilized unexpected support for bi-partisan legislation to reverse the new rules that cleared the Senate – although House Majority Leader Tom De Lay still holds it prisoner in the House. But who would have thought six months ago that the cause would win support from such allies as Senator Trent Lott or Kay Bailey Hutchinson, from my own Texas. You have moved "media reform" to center-stage, where it may even now become a catalyst for a new era of democratic renewal.

We working journalists have something special to bring to this work. This weekend at your conference there will be plenty of good talk about the mechanics of reform. What laws are needed? What advocacy programs

and strategies? How can we protect and extend the reach of those tools that give us some countervailing power against media monopoly – instruments like the Internet, cable TV, community-based radio and public broadcasting systems, alternative journals of news and opinion.

But without passion, without a message that has a beating heart, these won't be enough. There's where journalism comes in. It isn't the only agent of freedom, obviously; in fact, journalism is a deeply human and therefore deeply flawed craft – yours truly being a conspicuous example. But at times it has risen to great occasions, and at times it has made other freedoms possible. That's what the draftsmen of the First Amendment knew and it's what we can't afford to forget. So to remind us of what our free press has been at its best and can be again, I will call on the help of unseen presences, men and women of journalism's often checkered but sometimes courageous past.

Think with me for a moment on the reasons behind the establishment of press freedom. It wasn't ordained to protect hucksters, and it didn't drop like the gentle rain from heaven. It was fought and sacrificed for by unpretentious but feisty craftsmen who got their hands inky at their own hand presses and called themselves simply "printers." The very first American newspaper was a little three-page affair put out in Boston in September of 1690. Its name was *Publick Occurrences, Both Foreign and Domestick* and its editor was Benjamin Harris, who said he simply wanted "to give an account of such considerable things as have come to my attention." The government shut it down after one issue – just one issue! – for the official reason that printer Ben Harris hadn't applied for the required government license to publish. But I wonder if some Massachusetts pooh-bah didn't take personally one of Harris's proclaimed motives for starting the paper – "to cure the spirit of Lying much among us"?

No one seems to have objected when Harris and his paper disappeared – that was the way things were. But some forty-odd years later when printer John Peter Zenger was jailed in New York for criticizing its royal governor, things were different. The colony brought Zenger to trial on a charge of "seditious libel," and since it didn't matter whether the libel was true or not, the case seemed open and shut. But the jury ignored the judge's charge and freed Zenger, not only because the governor was widely disliked, but because of the closing appeal of Zenger's lawyer, Andrew Hamilton. Just hear him! His client's case was:

Not the cause of the poor Printer, nor of New York alone, [but] the cause of Liberty, and. . . every Man who prefers Freedom to a Life of Slavery will bless and honour You, as Men who. . . by an impartial and uncorrupt Verdict, [will] have laid a Noble Foundation for securing to ourselves, our Posterity and our Neighbors, That, to which Nature and the Laws of our Country have given us a Right, -- the Liberty – both of exposing and opposing arbitrary Power...by speaking and writing – Truth.

Still a pretty good mission statement!

During the War for Independence itself most of the three dozen little weekly newspapers in the colonies took the Patriot side and mobilized resistance by giving space to anti-British letters, news of Parliament's latest outrages, and calls to action. But the clarion journalistic voice of the Revolution was the onetime editor of the *Pennsylvania Magazine*, Tom Paine, a penniless recent immigrant from England where he left a trail of failure as a businessman and husband. In 1776 – just before enlisting in Washington's army – he published *Common Sense*, a hard-hitting pamphlet that slashed through legalisms and doubts to make an uncompromising case for an independent and republican America. It's been called the first best seller, with as many as 100,000 copies bought by a small literate population. Paine followed it up with another convincing collection of essays written in the field and given another punchy title, *The Crisis*. Passed from hand to hand and reprinted in other papers, they spread the gospel of freedom to thousands of doubters. And why I bring Paine up here is because he had something we need to restore – an unwavering concentration to reach ordinary people with the message that they mattered and could stand up for themselves. He couched his gospel of human rights and equality in a popular style that any working writer can envy. "As it is my design," he said, "to make those that can scarcely read understand, I shall therefore avoid every literary ornament and put it in language as plain as the alphabet."

That plain language spun off memorable one-liners that we're still quoting. "These are the times that try men's souls." "Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered." "What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly." "Virtue is not hereditary." And this: "Of more worth is one honest man to society and in the sight of God than all the crowned ruffians that ever lived." I don't know what Paine would have thought of political debate by bumper sticker and sound bite but he could have held his own in any modern campaign.

There were also editors who felt responsible to audiences that would dive deep. In 1787 and '88 the little New-York *Independent Advertiser* ran all eighty-five numbers of *The Federalist*, those serious essays in favor of ratifying the Constitution. They still shine as clear arguments, but they are, and they were, unforgiving in their demand for concentrated attention. Nonetheless, *The Advertiser* felt that it owed the best to its readers, and the readers knew that the issues of self-government deserved their best attention. I pray your goal of "media reform" includes a press as conscientious as the New-York *Advertiser*, as pungent as *Common Sense*, and as public-spirited as both. Because it takes those qualities to fight against the relentless pressure of authority and avarice. Remember, back in 1791, when the First Amendment was ratified, the idea of a free press seemed safely sheltered in law. It wasn't. Only seven years later, in the midst of a war scare with France, Congress passed and John Adams signed the infamous Sedition Act. The act made it a crime – just listen to how broad a brush the government could swing – to circulate opinions "tending to induce a belief" that lawmakers might have unconstitutional or repressive motives, or "directly or indirectly tending" to justify France or to "criminate," whatever that meant, the President or other Federal officials. No wonder that opponents called it a scheme to "excite a fervor against foreign aggression only to establish tyranny at home." John Ashcroft would have loved it.

But here's what happened. At least a dozen editors refused to be frightened and went defiantly to prison, some under state prosecutions. One of them, Matthew Lyon, who also held a seat in the House of Representatives, languished for four months in an unheated cell during a Vermont winter. But such was the spirit of liberty abroad in the land that admirers chipped in to pay his thousand-dollar fine, and when he emerged his district re-elected him by a landslide. Luckily, the Sedition Act had a built-in expiration date of 1801, at which time President Jefferson – who hated it from the first – pardoned those remaining under indictment. So the story has an upbeat ending, and so can ours, but it will take the kind of courage that those early printers and their readers showed.

Courage is a timeless quality and surfaces when the government is tempted to hit the bottle of censorship again during national emergencies, real or manufactured. As so many of you will recall, in 1971, during the Vietnam War, the Nixon administration resurrected the doctrine of "prior restraint" from the crypt and tried to ban the publication of the Pentagon Papers by the New York *Times* and the Washington *Post* – even though the documents themselves were a classified history of events during four earlier Presidencies. Arthur Sulzberger, the publisher of the *Times*, and Katherine Graham of the *Post* were both warned by their lawyers that they and their top managers could face criminal prosecution under espionage laws if they printed the material that Daniel Ellsberg had leaked – and, by the way, offered without success to the three major television networks. Or at the least, punitive lawsuits or whatever political reprisals a furious Nixon team could devise. But after internal debates – and the threats of some of their best-known editors to resign rather than fold under pressure – both owners gave the green light – and were vindicated by the Supreme Court. Score a round for democracy.

Bi-partisan fairness requires me to note that the Carter administration, in 1979, tried to prevent the Progressive magazine, published right here in Madison, from running an article called "How to Make an H-Bomb." The grounds were a supposed threat to "national security." But Howard Morland had compiled the piece entirely from sources open to the public, mainly to show that much of the classification system was Wizard of Oz smoke and mirrors. The courts again rejected the government's claim, but it's noteworthy that the journalism of defiance by that time had retreated to a small left-wing publication like the Progressive.

In all three of those cases, confronted with a clear and present danger of punishment, none of the owners flinched. Can we think of a single executive of today's big media conglomerates showing the kind of resistance that Sulzberger, Graham, and Erwin Knoll did? Certainly not Michael Eisner. He said he didn't even want ABC

News reporting on its parent company, Disney. Certainly not General Electric/NBC's Robert Wright. He took Phil Donahue off MNBC because the network didn't want to offend conservatives with a liberal sensibility during the invasion of Iraq. Instead, NBC brought to its cable channel one Michael Savage whose diatribes on radio had described non-white countries as "turd-world nations" and who characterized gay men and women as part of "the grand plan to cut down on the white race." I am not sure what it says that the GE/NBC executives calculated that while Donahue was offensive to conservatives, Savage was not.

And then there's Leslie Moonves, the chairman of CBS. In the very week that the once-Tiffany Network was celebrating its 75th anniversary – and taking kudos for its glory days when it was unafraid to broadcast "The Harvest of Shame" and "The Selling of the Pentagon" – the network's famous eye blinked. Pressured by a vociferous and relentless right wing campaign and bullied by the Republican National Committee – and at a time when its parent company has billions resting on whether the White House, Congress, and the FCC will allow it to own even more stations than currently permissible – CBS caved in and pulled the miniseries about Ronald Reagan that conservatives thought insufficiently worshipful. The chief honcho at CBS, Les Moonves, says taste, not politics, dictated his decision. But earlier this year, explaining why CBS intended to air a series about Adolf Hitler, Moonves sang a different tune: "If you want to play it safe and put on milquetoast then you get criticized... There are times when as a broadcaster when you take chances." This obviously wasn't one of those times. Granted, made-for-television movies about living figures are about as vital as the wax figures at Madame Tussaud's – and even less authentic – granted that the canonizers of Ronald Reagan hadn't even seen the film before they set to howling; granted, on the surface it's a silly tempest in a teapot; still, when a once-great network falls obsequiously to the ground at the feet of a partisan mob over a cheesy mini-series that practically no one would have taken seriously as history, you have to wonder if the slight tremor that just ran through the First Amendment could be the harbinger of greater earthquakes to come, when the stakes are really high. And you have to wonder what concessions the media tycoons-cum-suplicants are making when no one is looking.

So what must we devise to make the media safe for individuals stubborn about protecting freedom and serving the truth? And what do we all – educators, administrators, legislators and agitators – need to do to restore the disappearing diversity of media opinions? America had plenty of that in the early days when the republic and the press were growing up together. It took no great amount of capital and credit – just a few hundred dollars – to start a paper, especially with a little political sponsorship and help. There were well over a thousand of them by 1840, mostly small-town weeklies. And they weren't objective by any stretch. Here's William Cobbett, another Anglo-American hell-raiser like Paine, shouting his creed in the opening number of his 1790s paper, Porcupine's Gazette. "Peter Porcupine," Cobbett's self-bestowed nickname, declared:

Professions of impartiality I shall make none. They are always useless, and are besides perfect nonsense, when used by a news monger; for, he that does not relate news as he finds it, is something worse than partial; and . . . he that does not exercise his own judgment, either in admitting or rejecting what is sent him, is a poor passive tool, and not an editor.

In Cobbett's day you could flaunt your partisan banners as you cut and thrust, and not inflict serious damage on open public discussion because there were plenty of competitors. It didn't matter if the local gazette presented the day's events entirely through a Democratic lens. There was always an alternate Whig or Republican choice handy – there were, in other words, choices. As Alexis de Tocqueville noted, these many blooming journals kept even rural Americans amazingly well informed. They also made it possible for Americans to exercise one of their most democratic habits – that of forming associations to carry out civic enterprises. And they operated against the dreaded tyranny of the majority by letting lonely thinkers know that they had allies elsewhere. Here's how de Tocqueville put it in his own words:

It often happens in democratic countries that many men who have the desire or directed toward that light, and those wandering spirits who had long sought each other the need to associate cannot do it, because all being very small and lost in the crowd, they do not see each other and do not know where to find each other. Up comes a newspaper that exposes to their view the sentiment or the idea that had been presented to each of them

simultaneously but separately. All are immediately in the shadows finally meet each other and unite.

No wandering spirit could fail to find a voice in print. And so in that pre-Civil War explosion of humanitarian reform movements, it was a diverse press that put the yeast in freedom's ferment. Of course there were plenty of papers that spoke for Indian-haters, immigrant-bashers, bigots, jingoists and land-grabbers proclaiming America's Manifest Destiny to dominate North America. But one way or another, journalism mattered, and had purpose and direction.

Past and present are never as separate as we think. Horace Greeley, the reform-loving editor of the New York Tribune, not only kept his pages "ever open to the complaints of the wronged and suffering," but said that whoever sat in an editor's chair and didn't work to promote human progress hadn't tasted "the luxury" of journalism. I liken that to the words of a kindred spirit closer to our own time, I.F. Stone. In his four-page little *I.F. Stone's Weekly*, "Izzy" loved to catch the government's lies and contradictions in the government's own official documents. And amid the thunder of battle with the reactionaries, he said: "I have so much fun I ought to be arrested." Think about that. Two newsmen, a century apart, believing that being in a position to fight the good fight isn't a burden but a lucky break. How can our work here bring that attitude back into the newsrooms?

That era of a wide-open and crowded newspaper playing field began to fade as the old hand-presses gave way to giant machines with press runs and readerships in the hundreds of thousands and costs in the millions. But that didn't necessarily or immediately kill public-spirited journalism. Not so long as the new owners were still strong-minded individuals with big professional egos to match their thick pocketbooks. When Joseph Pulitzer, a one-time immigrant reporter for a German-language paper in St. Louis, took over the New York *World* in 1883 he was already a millionaire in the making. But here's his recommended short platform for politicians:

1. Tax luxuries
2. Tax Inheritances
3. Tax Large Incomes
4. Tax monopolies
5. Tax the Privileged Corporation
6. A Tariff for Revenue
7. Reform the Civil Service
8. Punish Corrupt Officers
9. Punish Vote Buying.
10. Punish Employers who Coerce their Employees in Elections

Also not a bad mission statement. Can you imagine one of today's huge newspaper chains taking that on as an agenda?

Don't get me wrong. The *World* certainly offered people plenty of the spice that they wanted – entertainment, sensation, earthy advice on living – but not at the expense of news that let them know who was on their side against the boodlers and bosses.

Nor did big-time, big-town, big bucks journalism extinguish the possibility of a reform-minded investigative journalism that took the name of muckraking during the Progressive Era. Those days of early last century saw a second great awakening of the democratic impulse. What brought it into being was a reaction against the Social Darwinism and unrestrained capitalistic exploitation that is back in full force today. Certain popular magazines made space for – and profited by – the work of such journalists – to name only a few – as Lincoln Steffens,

Ida Tarbell, Upton Sinclair, Samuel Hopkins Adams and David Graham Phillips. They ripped the veils from – among other things – the shame of the cities, the crimes of the trusts, the treason of the Senate and the villainies of those who sold tainted meat and poisonous medicines. And why were they given those opportunities? Because, in the words of Samuel S. McClure, owner of McClure's Magazine, when special interests defied the law and flouted the general welfare, there was a social debt incurred. And, as he put it: "We have to pay in the end, every one of us. And in the end, the sum total of the debt will be our liberty."

Muckraking lingers on today, but alas, a good deal of it consists of raking personal and sexual scandal in high and celebrated places. Surely, if democracy is to be served, we have to get back to putting the rake where the important dirt lies, in the fleecing of the public and the abuse of its faith in good government.

When that landmark Communications Act of 1934 was under consideration a vigorous public movement of educators, labor officials, and religious and institutional leaders emerged to argue for a broadcast system that would serve the interests of citizens and communities. A movement like that is coming to life again and we now have to build on this momentum.

It won't be easy, because the tide's been flowing the other way for a long time. The deregulation pressure began during the Reagan era, when then-FCC chairman Mark Fowler, who said that TV didn't need much regulation because it was just a "toaster with pictures," eliminated many public-interest rules. That opened the door for networks to cut their news staffs, scuttle their documentary units (goodbye to "The Harvest of Shame" and "The Selling of the Pentagon"), and exile investigative producers and reporters to the under-funded hinterlands of independent production. It was like turning out searchlights on dark and dangerous corners. A crowning achievement of that drive was the Telecommunications Act of 1996, the largest corporate welfare program ever for the most powerful media and entertainment conglomerates in the world – passed, I must add, with support from both parties.

And the beat of "convergence" between once-distinct forms of media goes on at increased tempo, with the communications conglomerates and the advertisers calling the tune. As safeguards to competition fall, an octopus like GE-NBC-Vivendi-Universal will be able to secure cable channels that can deliver interactive multimedia content – text, sound and images – to digital TVs, home computers, personal video recorders and portable wireless devices like cell phones. The goal? To corner the market on new ways of selling more things to more people for more hours in the day. And in the long run, to fill the airwaves with customized pitches to you and your children. That will melt down the surviving boundaries between editorial and marketing divisions and create a hybrid known to the new-media hucksters as "branded entertainment."

Let's consider what's happening to newspapers. A study by Mark Cooper of the Consumer Federation of America reports that two-thirds of today's newspaper markets are monopolies. And now most of the country's powerful newspaper chains are lobbying for co-ownership of newspaper and broadcast outlets in the same market, increasing their grip on community after community. And are they up-front about it? Hear this: Last December 3 such media giants as The New York Times, Gannett, Cox, and Tribune, along with the trade group representing almost all the country's broadcasting stations, filed a petition to the FCC making the case for that cross ownership the owners so desperately seek. They actually told the FCC that lifting the regulation on cross ownership would strengthen local journalism. But did those same news organizations tell their readers what they were doing? Not all. None of them on that day believed they had an obligation to report in their own news pages what their parent companies were asking of the FCC. As these huge media conglomerates increase their control over what we see, read, and hear, they rarely report on how they are themselves using their power to further their own interests and power as big business, including their influence over the political process.

Take a look at a new book called *Leaving Readers Behind: The Age of Corporate Newspapering* published as part of the Project on the State of the American Newspaper under the auspices of the Pew Charitable Trusts. The people who produced the book all love newspapers – Gene Roberts, former managing editor of The New York Times; Thomas Kunkel, dean of the Philip Merrill College of Journalism; Charles Layton, a veteran wire service reporter and news and feature editor at the Philadelphia Inquirer, as well as contributors such as

Ken Auletta, Geneva Overholser, and Roy Reed. Their conclusion: the newspaper industry is in the middle of the most momentous change in its three hundred year history – a change that is diminishing the amount of real news available to the consumer. A generation of relentless corporatization is now culminating in a furious, unprecedented blitz of buying, selling and consolidating of newspapers, from the mightiest dailies to the humblest weeklies. It is a world where “small hometown dailies in particular are being bought and sold like hog futures. Where chains, once content to grow one property at a time, now devour other chains whole. Where they are effectively ceding whole regions of the country to one another, further minimizing competition. Where money is pouring into the business from interests with little knowledge and even less concern about the special obligations newspapers have to democracy.” They go on to describe the toll that the never-ending drive for profits is taking on the news. In Cumberland, Maryland, for example, the police reporter had so many duties piled upon him he no longer had time to go to the police station for the daily reports. But newspaper management had a cost-saving solution: put a fax machine in the police station and let the cops send over the news they thought the paper should have. In New Jersey, the Gannett chain bought the Asbury Park Press, then sent in a publisher who slashed fifty five people from the staff and cut the space for news, and was rewarded by being named Gannett’s Manager of the Year. In New Jersey, by the way, the Newhouse and Gannett chains between them now own thirteen of the state’s nineteen dailies, or seventy three percent of all the circulation of New Jersey-based papers. Then there is The Northwestern in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, with a circulation of 23,500. Here, the authors report, is a paper that prided itself on being in hometown hands since the Johnson administration – the Andrew Johnson administration. But in 1998 it was sold not once but twice, within the space of two months. Two years later it was sold again: four owners in less than three years.

You’d better get used to it, concluded *Leaving Readers Behind*, because the real momentum of consolidation is just beginning – it won’t be long now before America is reduced to half a dozen major print conglomerates.

You can see the results even now in the waning of robust journalism. In the dearth of in-depth reporting as news organizations try to do more with fewer resources. In the failure of the major news organizations to cover their own corporate deals and lobbying as well as other forms of “crime in the suites” such as Enron story. And in helping people understand what their government is up to. The report by the Roberts team includes a survey in 1999 that showed a wholesale retreat in coverage of nineteen key departments and agencies in Washington. Regular reporting of the Supreme Court and State Department dropped off considerably through the decade. At the Social Security Administration, whose activities literally affect every American, only the New York Times was maintaining a full-time reporter and, incredibly, at the Interior Department, which controls five to six hundred million acres of public land and looks after everything from the National Park Service to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, there were no full-time reporters around.

That’s in Washington, our nation’s capital. Out across the country there is simultaneously a near blackout of local politics by broadcasters. The public interest group Alliance for Better Campaigns studied forty-five stations in six cities in one week in October. Out of 7,560 hours of programming analyzed, only 13 were devoted to local public affairs – less than one-half of 1% of local programming nationwide. Mayors, town councils, school boards, civic leaders get no time from broadcasters who have filled their coffers by looting the public airwaves over which they were placed as stewards. Last year, when a movement sprang up in the House of Representatives to require these broadcasters to obey the law that says they must sell campaign advertising to candidates for office at the lowest commercial rate, the powerful broadcast lobby brought the Congress to heel. So much for the “public interest, convenience, and necessity.”

So what do we do? What is our strategy for taking on what seems a hopeless fight for a media system that serves as effectively as it sells – one that holds all the institutions of society, itself included, accountable?

There’s plenty we can do. Here’s one journalist’s list of some of the overlapping and connected goals that a vital media reform movement might pursue.

First, we have to take Tom Paine’s example – and Danny Schechter’s advice – and reach out to regular citizens. We have to raise an even bigger tent than you have here. Those of us in this place speak a common language

about the “media.” We must reach the audience that’s not here – carry the fight to radio talk shows, local television, and the letters columns of our newspapers. As Danny says, we must engage the mainstream, not retreat from it. We have to get our fellow citizens to understand that what they see, hear, and read is not only the taste of programmers and producers but also a set of policy decisions made by the people we vote for.

We have to fight to keep the gates to the Internet open to all. The web has enabled many new voices in our democracy – and globally – to be heard: advocacy groups, artists, individuals, non-profit organizations. Just about anyone can speak online, and often with an impact greater than in the days when orators had to climb on soap box in a park. The media industry lobbyists point to the Internet and say it’s why concerns about media concentration are ill founded in an environment where anyone can speak and where there are literally hundreds of competing channels. What those lobbyists for big media don’t tell you is that the traffic patterns of the online world are beginning to resemble those of television and radio. In one study, for example, AOL Time Warner (as it was then known) accounted for nearly a third of all user time spent online. And two others companies – Yahoo and Microsoft – bring that figure to fully 50%. As for the growing number of channels available on today’s cable systems, most are owned by a small handful of companies. Of the ninety-one major networks that appear on most cable systems, 79 are part of such multiple network groups such as Time Warner, Viacom, Liberty Media, NBC, and Disney. In order to program a channel on cable today, you must either be owned by or affiliated with one of the giants. If we’re not vigilant the wide-open spaces of the Internet could be transformed into a system in which a handful of companies use their control over high-speed access to ensure they remain at the top of the digital heap in the broadband era at the expense of the democratic potential of this amazing technology. So we must fight to make sure the Internet remains open to all as the present-day analogue of that many-tongued world of small newspapers so admired by de Tocqueville.

We must fight for a regulatory, market and public opinion environment that lets local and community-based content be heard rather than drowned out by nationwide commercial programming.

We must fight to limit conglomerate swallowing of media outlets by sensible limits on multiple and cross-ownership of TV and radio stations, newspapers, magazines, publishing companies and other information sources. Let the message go forth: **“No Berlusconi in America!”**

We must fight to expand a noncommercial media system – something made possible in part by new digital spectrum awarded to PBS stations – and fight off attempts to privatize what’s left of public broadcasting. Commercial speech must not be the only free speech in America!

We must fight to create new opportunities, through public policies and private agreements, to let historically marginalized media players into more ownership of channels and control of content.

Let us encourage traditional mainstream journalism to get tougher about keeping a critical eye on those in public and private power and keeping us all informed of what’s important – not necessarily simple or entertaining or good for the bottom line. Not all news is *Entertainment Tonight*. And news departments are trustees of the public, not the corporate media’s stockholders.

In that last job, schools of journalism and professional news associations have their work cut out. We need journalism graduates who are not only better informed in a whole spectrum of special fields – and the schools do a competent job there – but who take from their training a strong sense of public service. And also graduates who are perhaps a little more hard-boiled and street-smart than the present crop, though that’s hard to teach. Thanks to the high cost of education, we get very few recruits from the ranks of those who do the world’s unglamorous and low-paid work. But as a onetime “cub” in a very different kind of setting, I cherish H.L. Mencken’s description of what being a young Baltimore reporter a hundred years ago meant to him. “I was at large,” he wrote,

in a wicked seaport of half a million people with a front seat at every public . . . [B]y all orthodox cultural standards I probably reached my all-time low, for the heavy reading of my teens had been abandoned in favor of life itself. . . . But it would be an exaggeration to say I was ignorant, for if I neglected the

humanities I was meanwhile laying in all the worldly wisdom of a police lieutenant, a bartender, a shyster lawyer or a midwife.

We need some of that worldly wisdom in our newsrooms. Let's figure out how to attract youngsters who have acquired it.

And as for those professional associations of editors they might remember that in union there is strength. One journalist alone can't extract from an employer a commitment to let editors and not accountants choose the appropriate subject matter for coverage. But what if news councils blew the whistle on shoddy or cowardly managements? What if foundations gave magazines such as the Columbia Journalism Review sufficient resources to spread their stories of journalistic bias, failure or incompetence? What if entire editorial departments simply refused any longer to quote anonymous sources – or give Kobe Bryant's trial more than the minimal space it rates by any reasonable standard – or to run stories planted by the Defense Department and impossible, for alleged security reasons, to verify? What if a professional association backed them to the hilt? Or required the same stance from all its members? It would take courage to confront powerful ownerships that way. But not as much courage as is asked of those brave journalists in some countries who face the dungeon, the executioner or the secret assassin for speaking out.

All this may be in the domain of fantasy. And then again, maybe not. What I know to be real is that we are in for the fight of our lives. I am not a romantic about democracy or journalism; the writer Andre Gide may have been right when he said that all things human, given time, go badly. But I know journalism and democracy are deeply linked in whatever chance we human beings have to redress our grievances, renew our politics, and reclaim our revolutionary ideals. Those are difficult tasks at any time, and they are even more difficult in a cynical age as this, when a deep and pervasive corruption has settled upon the republic. But too much is at stake for our spirits to flag. Earlier this week the Library of Congress gave the first Kluge Lifetime Award in the Humanities to the Polish philosopher Leslie Kolakowski. In an interview Kolakowski said: "There is one freedom on which all other liberties depend – and that is freedom of expression, freedom of speech, of print. If this is taken away, no other freedom can exist, or at least it would be soon suppressed."

That's the flame of truth your movement must carry forward. I am older than almost all of you and am not likely to be around for the duration; I have said for several years now that I will retire from active journalism when I turn 70 next year. But I take heart from the presence in this room, unseen, of Peter Zenger, Thomas Paine, the muckrakers, I.F. Stone and all those heroes and heroines, celebrated or forgotten, who faced odds no less than ours and did not flinch. I take heart in your presence here. It's your fight now. Look around. You are not alone.

This transcript is provided as a public service by Weapons of Mass distrACTION. However, donations do help defray our expenses. We ask that donations be made to **Democracy Now!** which broadcast the above address on Christmas Eve 2004, even as Bill Moyers was stepping down from his long-time perch as moderator of **NOW!** on PBS-TV. **DN!**'s website (containing convenient PayPal buttons for receiving donations) is **www.democracynow.org**.

"**NOW!**" will continue — at least for now — as a half-hour production under Moyers' co-host, David Brancaccio, in the same time slot. The remaining half-hour has been carved up by two of the Right's most cynical spinmeisters, Paul Gigot of the *Wall St. Journal's* editorial page and Tucker Carlson, former host of CNN's *Crossfire*. We suspect Bill Moyers' presence — and wisdom — will soon be missed.