



1-1-2009

What's Wrong with Corporate Media: an Insider's View

Jeff Cohen

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/shureview>

Recommended Citation

Cohen, Jeff (2009) "What's Wrong with Corporate Media: an Insider's View," *Sacred Heart University Review*: Vol. 25: Iss. 1, Article 6.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/shureview/vol25/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Sacred Heart University Press Publications at DigitalCommons@SHU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sacred Heart University Review by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@SHU. For more information, please contact ferribyp@sacredheart.edu.

JEFF COHEN

*What's Wrong with Corporate Media:
An Inside View*

It's great to be here at Sacred Heart. I was having dinner with some of the faculty from the Media Studies Department and I posed a deep philosophical question: What does it say about television news in our country when the two best programs about news and politics are on the Comedy Channel?

Tonight I'm going to discuss the corporate media by tracking my unusual evolution from media critic to pundit—some might say devolution. I founded FAIR twenty years ago, had been a ferocious critic of mainstream media, especially television news, and then over a period of years, as if in a slow-motion, Alice in Wonderland nightmare, I ended up embedded inside the mainstream media. Alice fell down a rabbit hole, I fell into cable news. I ended my TV career in 2003 inside the MSNBC news channel. That channel is run by NBC news, the top news division in the country, and that was the intense time when the White House was pushing our country to war, based on misinformation and pretense, and I was able to see news bias and news censorship first-hand during that crisis.

Jeff Cohen was the founder and director of Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR). This talk, covering many of the subjects discussed in his book, Cable News Confidential (PoliPoint Press, 2006), was presented at the Eleventh Annual Media Studies Symposium at Sacred Heart University on November 2, 2006.

The good news in my story is that I was a rare media critic who got an inside view of the news outlets that I was condemning. The bad news for me personally is that I had to share my adventures in cable news with all the right-wingers that dominate it, which means the Hannitys and the O'Reilleys and the Scarboroughs, and the Novaks, Buchanans, the Reverend Falwells. Thankfully for me I was able to avoid Ann Coulter, for she refused to debate me.

I'll never forget one personal episode in October 1999 that to me says a lot about modern television news, especially what's considered a news story and what isn't. It was the time that General Musharaff had the military coup in Pakistan. Pakistan and India had been exchanging fire for months, and India blamed it all on the General, who was now the head of state—he'd abolished elections and political parties. India goes on high military alert. Pakistan goes on high military alert. But Pakistan has just set off a nuclear bomb, so the two of them are now on high nuclear alert. These are countries that had fought wars against each other in the previous decades.

So I go to my regular show on Fox News, called *News Watch*, on the weekend as usual, and the first segment on our show, just a few days after the coup, was all about the JonBenet Ramsey case. JonBenet Ramsey is the six-year-old beauty pageant winner who was killed. Our second section was completely devoted to O.J. Simpson. He was back in the news because he'd had an argument with his girlfriend in Florida and they'd called 911. The third and final discussion segment of the show included a debate about whether it was appropriate for a character on the *Law and Order* mini-series to use the term "Lewinsky" as the synonym for a sex act. And I remember as I walked out of the studio that there had been no mention of India, Pakistan, or a possible nuclear war, and the bumper sticker that flashed into my head was the ironic bumper sticker from the '80s: "One nuclear bomb can ruin your whole day." But I thought it should be updated for TV news: "One nuclear bomb can ruin your whole day, but who cares? O.J.'s back in the news."

I've come to believe that the owners of TV news would be just as happy if we were a nation of mindless consumers as a nation of informed active citizens. That's why these news outlets are so often weapons of mass distraction. They're known as cable news channels. I prefer to look at them as reality-based entertainment channels. And you often hear the term "infotainment." After my experience at MSNBC and the run-up to the war, I've come to refer to these places as disinfortainment channels.

There are now a half a dozen giant media conglomerates that are sitting on the windpipe of the First Amendment, and I've taken paychecks from three of them, having been a pundit at CNN, Fox, and MSNBC. I saw inside the mainstream media that there were many conscientious journalists, but these are the lower level and mid-level people, often very young, energetic, public-minded, and ultimately quite powerless, and with the advent of war even more powerless than normal. It's important for us to know, those of us that are in media studies, that these TV operations are strict corporate hierarchies, and the folks that rise to the top are usually much better at corporate politics, at learning how not to rock boats, not to offend people in power, not to offend corporate sponsors, than they are at practicing tough and independent journalism.

My TV career started almost by accident nearly twenty years ago when I became a semi-regular guest on what was then by far the most raucous, the loudest, the biggest TV news debate show, CNN's *Crossfire*. People used to ask me why do I go on a show where I can rarely finish a sentence or two before being interrupted? I had a stock answer: number one, the quiet, dignified shows weren't inviting me. They weren't interested in my brand of media criticism. And number two, I'd never found anywhere else where you could be seated in a chair without moving for thirty minutes and just from the shouting, after the half hour, you'd had a complete aerobic workout. For me there was something even worse than the interruptions: it was during that period every year getting the Season's Greeting card signed by the co-host of the show, Patrick Buchanan. That was something I couldn't quite get used to.

You look back on *Crossfire* then, when I was a semi-regular, and you compare it to what exists now on cable news, on Fox News. *Crossfire* then almost looked like the Oxford debating society. It was twenty-two minutes on a serious subject, a two-on-two debate. As *Crossfire* was going off the air a few years ago, MSNBC was starting a show for another one of those right-wingers who host these shows, Joe Scarborough, a former Republican Congress member, and according to Scarborough, a network executive took him aside and said to him, and I'm quoting, "If you let someone talk for more than seven seconds on your show without interruptions, then you are a failure."

In 1996, I was tested for the job of being the permanent host of *Crossfire* from the left, and it led to some fun confrontations with the co-host on the right, was Bob Novak. The beauty of debating Novak is that he was so proud of being extreme that it was pretty easy for me to come across as commonsensical and reasonable. I want to play a clip so you'll get the idea. This is a debate on the death penalty. *Crossfire* always ended with a two-on-two debate, but then you'd excuse your two guests and the show would end with one minute of just the co-host from the left and the right going at each other. And we debated whether the death penalty is a deterrent. I know on the campus you've had Sister Helen Prejean here. She was one of the guests that we excused. I had pointed out that every advanced Western democracy, one by one, they had all abolished the death penalty, and we were in league with Saudi Arabia, China, North Korea, and Iran, and this was the final segment of that debate:

NOVAK: Jeff, you know, I don't know whether capital punishment is a deterrent. I don't much care. What it is—it provides vengeance against some of these brutal killers, and maybe countries that don't provide that vengeance are just overcivilized.

COHEN: But, Bob, you're sounding like the Ayatollahs of Iran. I think the death penalty is *not* a deterrent. It wastes

money because it costs more money to execute than life imprisonment. It's racist.

NOVAK: Vengeance.

COHEN: It's immoral.

NOVAK: Do you deny vengeance?

COHEN: Yes. I'm not for vengeance. From the left, I'm Jeff Cohen. Good night for *Crossfire*.

NOVAK: From the right, for vengeance, I'm Robert Novak. Join us again next time for another edition of *Crossfire*.

A growing minority of people in this country are against the death penalty, but I felt that Bob Novak sort of helped their cause when he reduced their support of the death penalty to a simple notion of vengeance.

Now I didn't get the job as being the permanent co-host from the left of *Crossfire* because I think I ran up against an unwritten rule in television news which says you can't represent the American Left every night on national TV if you're actually on the left. What corporate TV prefers is a battle between a conservative Republican and a conservative Democrat. It's a spectrum no wider than from GE to GM. And that's not just on Fox News, that's across TV news, especially on the Sunday morning Beltway shows.

At CNN I learned in my discussions at that time with management that one thing they were concerned about is that I would be overly critical of the sponsors of the program, and the main sponsor of the show at that time was General Electric. You know, the American media claim that they provide a marketplace of ideas, and that's indeed what democracy needs. But Americans under this theory are supposed to have regular access to right-wing points of view and left-wing points of view and all those many points of view that are in between. That's the theory at least. Our country has many problems, and wide-ranging debate offering various solutions to those problems might actually help us in solving the problems our country faces. But in reality, almost half of the political spectrum is regularly excluded from TV, and that's the progressive half.

People wrongly blame Fox News for the standard TV format that pits a telegenic, fire-breathing, forceful right-winger against a barely left-of-center, back-pedaling liberal. People are always complaining about Hannity and Colmes on that score. In the Al Franken book, when he writes Hannity and Colmes, Hannity is in regular type and Holmes is in tiny type. You can hardly see it. But the format was established before there even was a Fox News. That format was established years earlier by CNN and by PBS. For decades, the left has been represented on those channels by Mark Shields. Now Mark Shields is a very clever guy, very smart, very articulate, but he's about as genuine an advocate of the American left as Mel Gibson is an advocate of reformed Judaism.

I got my on-air screen test at *Crossfire* in 1996 because Michael Kinsley had given up his seat. Every night for six years he'd gone on that show and said "I'm Michael Kinsley from the left." And it was somewhat controversial. As he was leaving, a reporter from the *Washington Post* said, Well, what are your politics? and Kinsley described himself as a "wishy-washy moderate." It's important to remember that this is before Fox News, before Hannity and Colmes. In fact, the media watch group that I started, FAIR, used to run full-page ads in magazines where we'd have pictures of the people that represented the left on PBS and CNN, Mark Shields and Michael Kinsley, and we'd have a banner headline: "I'm not a leftist, but I play one on TV."

So TV shies away from certain points of view, but they don't shy away from the far right. You got a view of Bob Novak. He was always good to me, and during one of the commercial breaks I said to him, "Bob, settle this question for me. I've always wondered: who's further right wing, you or Pat Buchanan?" And he started railing about Pat Buchanan being a liberal, that Pat Buchanan is a liberal New Dealer on economics. Bob Novak said to me, "I was an Eisenhower Republican in the 1950s and I've moved further right every year since."

After my failed tryout over at CNN in 1996, my TV career was saved, ironically enough by Rupert Murdoch and the new Fox News

channel that he had just launched. In my book, *Cable News Confidential*, I reveal a lot of the secrets at Fox News. I must admit that I could not confirm the charge that I used to hear all the time that the executives at Fox News, when they reviewed the audition tapes of potential female anchors, did that with the sound turned off. That I couldn't prove.

Being a progressive at Fox News channel was a little bit like being a feminist at the Augusta National Golf Club. It wasn't easy. Rupert Murdoch, the mogul, had hired as his news chairman over at Fox Roger Ailes. Ailes was a high-level Republican media operative. He was the executive producer of Rush Limbaugh's television show. He had absolutely no experience in journalism. But he did have experience in creating thirty-second attack ads. Indeed, he was the best in the business. And I think in Murdoch's mind, he was thinking, Wow, look at what Roger Ailes can do in thirty seconds. Imagine what Ailes could do with a TV network 24/7. And I don't want to give the impression that Murdoch hates all Democrats. In July he was doing a fund-raiser for Senator Hillary Clinton in New York.

The Fox News chair Ailes was the guy—some people here are old enough to remember—behind the ads that helped Bush Sr. become the president in 1988. These ads linked the Democratic presidential candidate, Governor Michael Dukakis, to a convicted rapist and murderer, Willie Horton, an African American. Ailes said at the time “The only question is whether we depict Willie Horton with a knife in his hand or without it.” And who is Fox News's first anchor? It was Tony Snow, who is currently President Bush's official spokesperson. Snow had been a Republican operative; he'd been the substitute host on Rush Limbaugh's radio show; and then he becomes the news anchor at Fox News.

So when I started at Fox, I was not naive about what the channel was about. I started there soon after it launched. I was an on-air panelist on the media criticism show every week for five years, and I was hardly naive. But what I didn't know until I'd been there awhile was that Roger Ailes and Tony Snow, were

almost moderates compared to the people I would come to meet. Even the weather and sports guys at Fox News, it turns out, are rabid right-wingers.

How many people have seen the movie, *Outfoxed?* People always ask me if it's widely believed by the staff at Fox News that it truly is "fair and balanced" and I can remember times that I was in the green room—and of course the Fox News channel is on the TV monitor in the green room—and a particularly biased story would come on and you'd hear someone in the room other than me would say, "Wow, that was really fair and balanced!" sarcastically, and everyone in the room would crack up.

I talked earlier about the pseudo-debates that purport to be between right and left. Well, representing the left on Fox News is Allen Colmes on the Hannity and Colmes show. Well, a top Fox executive once commented that "You know who the best host is of any of the shows we have on our channel? It's Allen Colmes, because he knows what his job is. His job is to make Sean Hannity look good." Now of course people on the outside suspected a sort of a put-up job, but it's only when you are there every week and you can become part of the furniture that people let their hair down and you start hearing these stories. How many people know who the Washington Generals are? The Washington Generals travel around the world every night playing the Harlem Globetrotters, and they are sent out every night to lose. That's generally how people view Allen Colmes and his job at Fox News.

Fox News Watch: I was on that show every weekend for five years, and I'll never forget that very dark day in 1999 when the District Attorney in Boulder, Colorado, came forward and he announced—and it was a case that every TV executive was counting on to get a huge O.J. Simpson-type trial, that they could just park their cameras in and cover it hour after hour, day after day—the DA announced that there's not enough evidence to indict anyone in the JonBenet Ramsey case. And I immediately went on the show at *Fox News Watch* and I warned that there might be a rash of suicides among cable news executives. If you remember what happened in

August, John Mark Karr—How many people know who John Mark Karr is? How many of you can identify your member of Congress? That's the point. John Mark Karr basically took over TV news for ten or twelve days. He was on cable news hour after hour. He's the guy who was in Thailand and he confessed to sexually assaulting and killing JonBenet Ramsey. He's such a disturbed individual that he fantasized the whole thing. But as he was traveling from Thailand to California and from California to Colorado on the plane, every hour on TV news we were being told what he was wearing, what he was eating, what he was drinking, how he was reacting. It was as if he were a world historical figure. He was like Nelson Mandela getting out of the prison in South Africa, only bigger. And this is during a time when there's wars going on in different parts of the globe that the U.S. government is directly involved in. There were important court decisions coming out that week that the American people didn't hear much about, but they knew everything that there was to know about John Mark Karr. It's true that polls show that most Americans can't even identify their member of Congress, and I don't blame people. You can be a heavy TV news viewer and not know that information, but you'll know all the details about JonBenet and John Mark Karr and who Jessica Simpson might be dating this week.

When I left Fox News, people assume I was fired. I actually went voluntarily. I left in 2002 for a more middle of the road news channel, a less conservative channel, and that's MSNBC, run by NBC and owned by General Electric, and I figured I would get a better platform for my views there. Who knew I was better off at Fox. Things started OK. I was appearing every afternoon in debates. I would debate a different right-winger on a serious subject, and then at night I was a senior producer on the Phil Donahue prime time show, which was about to launch. In the on-air debates in the first couple of weeks, I was blaming the Bush administration with evidence for failing to prevent September 11th, and I was criticizing their record on protecting our precious constitutional liberties. I was so excited about what I was doing every day that I sent out a mass

e-mail to everyone on my list, telling them what time of day they could see me and on what channel. I got a lot of responses back, but I'll never forget the one I got from Noam Chomsky. He wrote, "Jeff—Sounds great. Almost enough to convince me to get cable access—but not quite."

What I found at MSNBC, as elsewhere in TV news, was a drunken exuberance for the celebrity, the crime story, the sex scandal, matched by a grim timidity about offending the powers that be, especially when they're conservatives. Going after the powers that be when they're up is something that risks your media career, but going after them when they're down is much more possible, and that's why I think Keith Olberman is getting away with stuff that we could never get away with when I was there.

I was at MSNBC in the summer of 2002, which in television news was known as the child abduction summer, the child kidnapping summer. There was no increase at all statistically in child kidnapping, but there was a huge spike in the coverage as these channels turned news into soap opera for ratings. And the thing became very newsworthy if the kidnapped individual was an upper-middle-class blonde girl. When a black girl named Alexis Patterson disappeared in Milwaukee, most people never heard her name. But they knew everything about these other cases that were going on month after month.

In the book I describe how if there was a new kidnapping, or a new wrinkle in an old kidnapping, how all of the regular programming would just be thrown out the window as we would attach ourselves to the tabloid story, to the soap opera. Earlier that year—and we didn't learn this until later—Jeffrey Immelt, the CEO of General Electric told NBC executives that he wanted MSNBC to attract as much attention as Fox News, even if it meant featuring, and I'm quoting, "clowns jumping out of airplanes," and I began to wonder if the problem over at MSNBC was that the clowns were piloting the airplanes.

One afternoon in June of 2002 I was scheduled to debate Ann Coulter during my regular time slot. It was my afternoon debate

format. It was a debate on her book. I read chunks of the book, for which I deserve combat pay. I got into makeup, as I did every afternoon at that time, put on my earpiece, walked out to the set—again, this is my standard segment—and as I'm walking toward the set I hear in my earpiece "She won't debate you." And I said, well, fine, tell her I'm ready to debate. I read the book, I'm ready to debate. And the producer said, well, she's not ready. I was the staff member ready to debate the contents of a controversial book. She was not on staff; she was the invited guest, unwilling to debate the contents of her controversial book. Which one of us do you think appeared solo on MSNBC discussing that book with an anchor person who didn't know enough to ask one tough question? It was Ann Coulter, and this is what she calls the "liberal media."

Coulter lives on cable news, as does Reverend Jerry Falwell. I debated him a couple of times. I describe it in the book. One of our debates was during my afternoon time slot. It was a typical debate on separation of church and state. Nothing really special about it, until we got to the end, and you could see—I actually published the photograph, because the photo is worth a thousand words—at the end of the debate, Falwell is so proud of himself. He's got the last word, and in his view he hit the ball out of the park when he said "The separation of church and state is the myth, just like global warming." and if you look in the book—we were on split-screen—I break out in laughter, and you see Jerry Falwell is so impressed with his pro-God, anti-environment two-fer.

TV is a visual medium. Dramatic video rules. If you are a staffer at any one of these channels, if you ever work at a TV news outfit, it'll be drummed into your head: the importance of footage, the importance of visuals. Chase footage is good, crime, fires, floods. But every staffer knows the exceptions to the rule, and the exception to the rule about dramatic footage is war footage, especially civilian victims of U.S. military actions. That's generally off-limits. War is the most unreal of all the unreality on American TV news. War is just another show, with special theme music and glitzy graphics. You hear Jon Stewart making a joke about it: "You know, well, we got

this war. Is there a way we can punch it up a little bit with some music?” And the only reason there’s ever any need to punch it up a little is because the guts of the story, the killing and the maiming, are removed from any coverage of the news, and that’s by design and it’s by orders.

When the United States invaded Afghanistan in 2001, CNN executives sent memos to their staff demanding that any images of civilian casualties in Afghanistan be played down. Any such image had to be balanced with the anchorperson or the correspondent offering extensive commentary, reminding viewers that the Taliban harbored terrorists, reminding them that thousands of Americans had died. This was just a few weeks after 9/11. Who had forgotten about 9/11? When these memos leaked—and thank God for whistleblowers, who get these memos and let the public in on them—the chairman of CNN (he wrote one of the memos) was asked about them by the *Washington Post*, he said, “It seems perverse to focus too much on the casualties or hardship in Afghanistan.”

It’s because of TV news censorship of war. Unlike TV news almost anywhere else in the world, whether you are in the Muslim world, the Arab world, in western Europe, in Canada, the wars that we see, where the U.S. military are the main actors, it is very much a sanitized war, and it’s completely different than the wars that are seen by people across the globe. It’s one of the main biases in U.S. media. It’s what academics call ethnocentrism. It’s the idea, and I think it’s drummed into us, whether it’s by TV news or the *New York Times*, that the lives of U.S. citizens simply matter more than the lives of others, especially dark-skinned people abroad. I think ethnocentrism is an unnecessarily fancy word for the word racism.

In the summer of 2002, I debated and opposed the Iraq invasion on the air, in my time-slot, week after week. The rule was that I couldn’t discuss even the weather on that channel without being balanced by at least one fire-breathing right-winger. But my debates were terminated in October of 2002 as the war neared, and I was silenced. I was replaced by non-debate segments. These non-debate segments featured the weapons of mass destruction experts,

the military analysts. These were the retired colonels, the retired generals, the retired CIA officers. These people never had to be in debates. They were never balanced by an opposing view. They were almost never asked a tough question by the anchor. Why? Because they were presented as independent, objective experts.

But these military experts clearly were not independent. One of the most important revelations about media misconduct during the Iraq War was one that leaked out, one that was boasted about by CNN's news president, Eason Jordan. He admitted before the war that he had gone to the Pentagon to get prior government approval for who these military analysts would be, and he said, and I'm quoting him, "I went to the Pentagon several times before the war, and met with important people there and said here are the generals we're thinking of retaining to advise us on the air and off the air about the war. We got a big thumbs-up on all of them. That was important."

Virtually everything these experts told the American public through the mainstream media, unopposed, about the Iraqi threat turned out to be wrong. After no weapons of mass destruction were found, it was fascinating to hear the excuses of the mainstream media's so-called experts. I list and categorize these excuses in the book. One of the regulars was a former CIA officer and analyst named Kenneth Pollack, and before the war Pollack pushed relentlessly for an invasion. He went on Oprah's show and said that Iraq could use weapons of mass destruction in our own homeland. And afterward he was asked about how he could get something so totally wrong, and he blamed his mistaken comments on a consensus in the intelligence community. He said, and I'm quoting, "That was not me making that claim, that was me parroting the claims of the so-called experts."

But he'd been introduced, day after day, week after week, as an expert and never had any problems. FAIR issued a study before the war on who was allowed to speak and who wasn't during two crucial weeks, one week before and one week after Colin Powell went to the United Nations and made his bellicose speech, pushing for war

based on exaggerations and falsehoods about the weapons of mass destruction. There were provable falsehoods, provable that very day, and it was happening in media round the world. They were picking apart the Colin Powell speech instantly. In our country, you could be an avid TV news viewer and you would have been clueless about Powell's exaggerations and falsehoods. Why? Because in FAIR's study, 393 people during those two crucial weeks were interviewed on CBS, NBC, ABC, and so-called public TV, PBS, their four biggest news shows. Of the 393 people interviewed about Iraq, a total of three were anti-war advocates. That's a fraction of one percent. I'm always looking for silver linings when I analyze media performance. I think the silver lining there is, well, at least we had more debate in the run-up to the Iraq War than they had on the Soviet Union's television before that country's disastrous invasion of Afghanistan twenty years earlier.

In a totalitarian society there's no pretense of debates in the media. In our country, there are media debates, but they're usually within strict limits. There have been many debates about the Iraq war, but they almost always focus on tactics, not the motives. You can have debate after debate after debate questioning whether the invasion of Iraq was ill-planned, was it ill-executed, did we have enough troops, has the occupation been botched, should Rumsfeld be fired or not. But the one thing that you can't really do is question the motives of U.S. foreign policy. If you suggest that the motive for the Iraq invasion maybe didn't have much to do with weapons of mass destruction or freedom and democracy for the Iraqi people, if you suggest that the invasion had something to do with oil or empire or permanent military bases in the Middle East or domestic political considerations, then you're not ready for prime time, and Phil Donahue was in fact yanked off the air because of that. My friend Dennis Kucinich, the Congress member, he was on the air on TV before the invasion of Iraq and he suggested that oil was a major motivation, and two days later in the *Washington Post*, one of their regular op-ed columnists, in fact one of their liberals, wrote a column where he was just fuming about Kucinich for saying that oil

had something to do with it. He wrote "How did this fool get on *Meet the Press*?"

On *Donahue*, we tried to present dissenting views before the war, but we were terminated three weeks before the invasion, and we were terminated when we were the most watched television show on that channel. I encourage people in media studies to see if you can find another example where a TV channel canceled its most watched program. The day after *Donahue* was terminated an internal NBC memo leaked out, thanks to some whistleblower. Never supposed to be public, it explained in essence why we'd been muzzled in the previous months and why we were terminated. It said that Donahue represents "a difficult public face for NBC in a time of war. He seems to delight in presenting guests who are anti-war, anti-Bush, and skeptical of the administration's motives." You see: questioning an administration's motives can get you into trouble.

The NBC internal memo went on to describe their nightmare scenario, where *Donahue* would become, "a home for the liberal anti-war agenda at the same time that our competitors are waving the flag at every opportunity." What was NBC's solution? Drop *Donahue*, pick up the flag. What I learned when I was on the inside: when journalists are expending so much energy waving flags, they don't have the energy to do their jobs, which is to ask the tough questions before our young men and women are sent overseas to kill or be killed.

If you watched MSNBC in the run-up to the war, after they got rid of Donahue, you would have seen that they had accomplished what was seemingly impossible at MSNBC: they had even out-Foxed Fox. Right before MSNBC terminated *Donahue*, who did they hire? Michael Savage. How many people have ever heard Savage's show on talk-radio? For those that haven't, Michael Savage is a guy who before he was hired by MSNBC called for anti-war protesters to be arrested in the event of an invasion. He refers to developing countries as quote "turd world nations." He says women should have been denied the right to vote. He says Latinos breed

like rabbits. Inner-city kids that are the victims of gun violence are to Savage “ghetto slime.” The Million Mom’s March for gun control: to Savage, that’s the Million Dikes March. Think about it. Donahue is terminated from NBC. This is a guy that’s almost a legend in American television, known for respecting people of different points of view. He’s terminated by NBC as a difficult public face at the same time that they hire Michael Savage. To me, that couplet says more about the myth of the liberal media than thirty academic books could tell you.

To show you the level of dysfunction at some of these corporate media, six days after they announced that they were hiring Savage, in my e-mail box from the president of NBC I was invited, along with everyone on staff, to mandatory diversity workshops, where we could learn how to work better with the people that come from different backgrounds, cultural backgrounds, racial groups in our workplace. Frankly, I skipped the meeting, feeling I could learn the true attitudes of management about diversity by listening to their latest hire ramble on about “ghetto slime” and “dikes.”

In our country it’s common to hear folks of all political persuasions, but especially conservatives, say that they favor meritocracy. That’s a system in which advancement is based on achievement or ability. But what we have in the corporate media is the exact opposite. The dictionary has a word for it: it’s called a kakistocracy. Literally it means rule by the worst. It’s a system in which the least qualified and the least principled rise to the top. I saw that in the corporate media during the run-up to the Iraq war. Those who challenged the evidence that Iraq represented some serious threat to our security, those who warned of the chaos and quagmire that would result: well, we’ve basically been spat out of the media system. But if you echoed the official deceptions, you’ve probably seen your career flourish in television news. I’m not aware of a single TV news executive or anchor or correspondent or pundit or so-called expert who lost their job for getting such a huge story so totally wrong, as almost all of them did in the run-up to the Iraq war. One of the hawkish hosts that I describe in the book, who

hosted a program on MSNBC, has lost his TV show. Now he's the general manager of MSNBC. He's been kicked upstairs.

One guy who got the story totally correct is the ex-Marine and former weapons inspector, Scott Ritter. In late 2002, when we would discuss booking Scott Ritter on the *Donahue* show, it was almost like clockwork. We would hear this smear in the building: "Oh, we've heard that Ritter is receiving covert government funds from Saddam Hussein." And we'd say, well, where's the evidence? How can you say anything like this? But it was like clockwork. The editor-in-chief of MSNBC actually went on the air and uttered the smear for the whole country to hear. There's no evidence to it, but it was a very effective smear at taking one of the most eloquent dissenting voices and reducing his number of appearances on TV.

The irony for me is that I learned a couple of years later that one of the right-wingers I regularly debated on MSNBC was indeed receiving covert government funds. I'm talking about Armstrong Williams, who received nearly a quarter-million dollars from Bush's Department of Education to promote the No Child Left Behind Act. For some reason, I wasn't invited in the Bush administration's No Pundit Left Behind program.

So it's important to remember, as I said at the beginning, that these news outlets are strict corporate hierarchies. The power is at the top. In the last months of *Donahue*, we were ordered by management that every time we booked a guest who was anti-war, we had to book two that were pro-war. If we booked two guests on the left, we had to book three guests on the right. At one staff meeting, a producer proposed booking Michael Moore and she was told that she'd have to have three right-wingers for balance. I thought about proposing Noam Chomsky as a guest, but our stage couldn't accommodate the twenty-eight right-wingers we would have needed for balance.

I want to finish up now and get to your questions, but I don't want to spend the whole talk about the bad news of corporate media, because there's a lot of good news in the media realm, and I know in your Media Studies department you stress this kind of

thing. The good news is that individuals are becoming the media. The good news is that news consumers are getting active. They're looking aggressively for alternatives. If they see the news from the corporate outlets as being weapons of mass distraction or weapons of mass deception, they are aggressively seeking out alternatives. That's why in the run-up to the war, so many people were looking for BBC TV news coverage. The joke at *The Nation* magazine, which is a left-of-center magazine, is that Bush may be bad for the country, but he's been great for *The Nation*. Their circulation is through the roof. Amy Goodman's *Democracy Now!*, expanded from radio to TV, has never been bigger. Independent blogs are now getting millions of visitors. You've heard the caricature that they get up and that they're in their pajamas and they're typing away. Well, many of them do that, and they have an audience of millions of people. Websites like commondreams.org and altnet.org are booming.

Independent documentaries are finding an audience like never before, because you can do Internet marketing. You saw the *OutFoxed* documentary. When that came out, the week it was released in 2004, it was the biggest selling DVD on Amazon.com, and that's because grassroots groups spread the word about it. Behind Robert Greenwald's documentaries, you don't have any TV networks. You don't have any Hollywood movie studios. You just have an Internet getting the word out about these documentaries. How many have seen the new one by Greenwald, called *Iraq for Sale*? It's about war profiteering. It's something you might want to bring to your campus.

It's clear that conservatives dominate talk TV; they dominate talk radio. The interesting thing about the Internet is that it's dominated by independent-minded people and by progressives. Unlike talk TV and talk radio, which is communication from the few to the many sanctioned by the corporate, the Internet is a far more democratic, small "d," medium, a medium of debate, a medium of open discourse. It's communication from the many to the many. And there's that ethic which is so interesting among

bloggers: if you want to attack something, then you link to the item you're attacking, so people that look at what you're doing can go to the original and see if you're making stuff up or you're exaggerating. And then if you want to join the debate, you can easily do that. So it's a medium that really encourages democracy and debate.

Of course, it's not a medium that is very well-suited to bullies and demagogues, like Rush Limbaugh or Bill O'Reilly. I once did a book about Limbaugh. Limbaugh was always citing sources, and it always sounded so convincing, like when he talked about that study at Tufts University. I'm not making this stuff up, folks. A three-year study, five thousand co-eds: the larger a woman's bra size, the smaller her IQ. Now, he got away with that: months and months later we called Tufts University and found that there was no such study. He made it up. But on the Internet you can't make things up that easily if you're in a debate mode and blogger mode where you're debating someone and you're making sure that the other person's point of view is linked to. So again, the rise of the Internet in my view has coincided with the rise of some democracy. Today there's a campaign to preserve the Internet as a free and open forum that will not be deformed in the hands of big telecommunications companies and big cable TV companies. If you want to know about that, it's all at Savetheinternet.com.

Media criticism, skepticism, and activism have vastly increased since I started FAIR twenty years ago. We were very lonely back then when we started FAIR. Today, our twenty-year-old motto doesn't seem so quixotic: Don't take the media lying down.