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News

Posted on Tue, Oct. 11, 2005

Bring back Fairness Doctrine

One-sided media are misinforming and dividing America

BOB PERKOWITZ
Special to the Observer

Do you think that America is fighting the war in Iraq to stop terrorism and promote democracy, and that we are accomplishing our mission? Or do you believe that the war in Iraq, based on lies and incompetently managed, has been a boon to worldwide terrorism and hurt America's leadership role throughout the world?

How about Hurricane Katrina? Is President George W. Bush masterminding the most comprehensive natural disaster response in the history of the nation? Or have his misaligned priorities led to levee and barrier island erosion that contributed to the flooding and deaths in New Orleans, and that the recovery effort is a corrupt boondoggle?

Have President Bush's tax breaks invigorated America's economy, providing jobs and income growth to average Americans? Or are the trillions of dollars of irresponsible tax breaks for wealthy Americans and big corporations coupled with wasteful federal spending about to wreak havoc on America's economy?

From facts to propaganda

Most Americans believe that they have an honest and accurate perspective on politics, economics and news in general. Once upon a time this was true. The Federal Communications Commission used to require that broadcast licensees present controversial issues of public importance in a truly fair and balanced manner. In 1987, though, the FCC repealed the Fairness Doctrine. American media, once a public trust, have since evolved into something more akin to a propaganda machine.

If there is a divided America, red states vs. blue states, it is not so much because we have different perspectives on the same news. It is because we get, and sometimes only have access to, different news and information.

If you believe the first of the pairs of statements in the opening paragraphs of this column, you get your news

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and form your opinions based on information from sources like Fox News, Rush Limbaugh and the Sinclair television stations. These sources are unabashedly biased in their support of the president and his policies. Sinclair affiliates, which reach 22 percent of the American public, are even required to take a pledge to not report critically on President Bush or the war in Iraq.

Alternatives vanish

Alternative or critical perspectives have no significant presence in American mass media anymore. Alternative mass media are vanishing. Six giant multi-national corporations control most of America's radio and television stations and newspapers.

These media conglomerate news sources are controlled by powerful economic and political forces. Their priority is not on acting in the public interest by reporting accurate and unbiased news. They follow corporate guidance and avoid controversy that might distract advertisers or viewers.

The war in Iraq provides an illustrative example. Certain information about the war is strictly controlled. We get the mind-numbing statistics on American soldiers killed in action almost daily. However, deaths of American civilians or Iraqi casualties, are not tallied. Photos of injured Americans or of the flag-draped coffins of American dead are taboo.

Even domestic news on the war is limited.

Three weeks ago the largest anti-war demonstrations since Vietnam occurred in Washington, D.C. As many as 250,000 people gathered there, and many thousands more protested in other American cities. This should have been a big story, but in our own Charlotte Observer it merited just 213 words buried on page 4A.

The following day, a scant 400 pro-war marchers gathered in Washington. The Observer provided this small group with the exact same coverage.

Most Americans share the same values and given the same information would draw similar conclusions. We all require unbiased information to make accurately informed decisions about our politicians and our future.

For 50 years prior to 1987 America lived under regulations that required truly fair and balanced news reporting. The best thing we could do now for American democracy is bring back the Fairness Doctrine.

Unfortunately, given the current political environment, it is unlikely Congress will reinstate the Fairness Doctrine. In the absence of federal protection for our right to know, we each need to seek out varied news sources to make sure we have a broad perspective and accurate information.

If you want to stay informed, subscribe to multiple newspapers. I get The Charlotte Observer, New York Times and Wall Street Journal. Look to international sources like the Economist magazine and internet resources like TruthOut and AlterNet. In your television and radio viewing, balance commercial news with National Public Radio and Public Broadcasting Service television. Don't stick to one channel or paper and think you have an accurate perspective. Everyone has an agenda. Make your agenda being in touch with reality.

Bob

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