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The Press under challenge at a Time of War

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A free, responsible and independent press is one of the hallmark strengths of these United States. It is something many other countries envy.

We take it for granted.

Yet with the wreckage and horror of Sept. 11 behind us and a major war looming, we are due for a reminder.

In 1945, at another time of war, the Supreme Court ruled that "the widest possible dissemination of information from diverse and antagonistic sources is essential to the welfare of the people." That ruling has long protected the sort of wild cacophony of voices from which we get our sense of world events. During war, the stakes are higher, the need greater. We demand reliable facts, incisive analysis and solid information to get us thoughtfully through any time of crisis.

During Desert Storm, I was posted in Dhahran as a reporter for Newsweek Magazine. That port city was a nub in the military's logistics tail, the major entry point for food, fuel, weapons, ammunition and all other supplies. To hit that port was to "cut the tail" of the Pentagon's great beast.

The logistics experts knew it. I knew it. The officials in the Pentagon's Joint Information Bureau (JIB) knew it. They released almost no information. It was a reporter's battle just to get an interview with a soldier charged with cleaning the latrines.

Of course there are reasons why the Pentagon wanted to control all information.

- *Military officials didn't want to telegraph troop movements to the enemy.
- *They didn't want to give away any well-considered strategy.
- *They didn't want to reveal timing.
- *And they didn't want bad news.

But back in the United States, where families have sent their sons and daughters into conflict, there is a need to know. Imagine a war in which the only information you could get was through a military briefing. Yet that was largely what America was offered in that conflict.

To be a reporter in that war was to often be in conflict with the U.S. government. But the Pentagon's move toward a news blackout backfired.

When it later came out that Saddam's scud missiles were far less sophisticated than the Pentagon had claimed—and that the Patriot missiles we sent out after them often failed to reach their target—the press lockdown started to look silly at best, and sinister at worst.

It also seemed vaguely un-American.

This time, the press is offered front-row seats. Reporters in a new conflict will be "embedded" in military units in the field—allowed to report (just as Ernie Pyle and countless others did in WWII) directly from the theater of conflict. Fine and good. But those will just be snapshots from the field. The larger fact remains that the only way to get a reliable picture in the fog of battle will be the same as it has ever been—to piece together as many as many solid facts and trustworthy bits of analysis from as many sources as possible.

Pentagon officials will always cooperate where and how they

want. That's not my worry. Reporters have always had to push and dodge. The more serious challenge is a quieter one being made under the cloak of free market enterprise.

The Federal Communications Commission, the agency charged with preserving the ideals that the Supreme Court articulated in 1945, is busy undermining the very structure it was established to preserve. In 1996, FCC officials moved to release radio stations from controls intended to guarantee open access to our airwaves. Now, The FCC is on the move again, trying to withdraw the last thin barriers that prevent excessive consolidation of other media.

The possible result is all too clear:

One Voice. One Station. Every Market. All the Time.

Recent history speaks volumes. In 1996, the nation's two largest radio chains owned 115 stations. Today, just seven years after the FCC loosened its leash, the same two chains own more than 1,400 stations. This represents an extraordinary contraction of the number of voices, opinions, thoughts and ideas to which the listening public has access. And it represents a gross violation of the Supreme Court's eloquent ruling.

Today, radio stations across America offer exactly the same content, with local weather pasted in for "authenticity." There is no real freedom of speech in that. There is no "widest possible dissemination of information..." And there is frighteningly little way to ensure that the messy, exuberant, ongoing dialog so central to American life will be preserved.

Newspapers and broadcast are now under the same gun. Already, 10 companies own 90 percent of the media outlets. For the conglomerates, this is good news. More stations, more newspapers, more profit. And the news for them is only getting better. The FCC is about to take away the last barriers to further concentration.

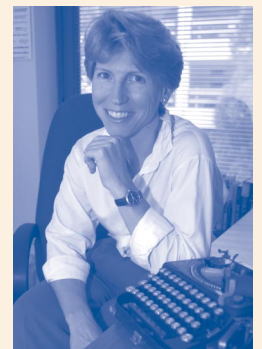
One Voice. One Station. Every Market. All the Time.

Yet let's consider our nation at a time of war. Do we want to limit and constrict our information? Shall we all be in agreement? Do we want to choke off our access to varied opinion and stifle our always noisy flow of thought?

We do not. We cannot afford it if we wish to remain the strong and vital country we have been. This right to argue and debate and to self-educate deserves whatever safeguards we can give it. This issue deserves our attention, and it's worth a fight.

The FCC on this is wrong. I can hardly think of a greater national tragedy than having corporate greed be the driving rationale for narrowed thought.

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