MEDIA GIRAFFE Project

Innovation for democracy;
Standing above the crowd

http://www.mediagiraffe.org

108 Bartlett Hall
Univ. of Massachusetts-Amherst
Amherst MA 01003
(413) 545-5931
mediagiraffe@journ.umass.edu

To: Attendees of the "Media and American Democracy" seminar
Shorenstein Center, Harvard University, July, 2004

From: Bill Densmore, director, Media Giraffe Project
Date: December 27, 2004
Subject: Summary of Shorenstein institute proceedings

Some of you may find of interest my attached summary of the panels and speakers at the "Media & American Democracy" institute, June 27-July 1, 2004. It was held at the Joan Shorenstein Center on Press & Politics at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, at Harvard University, in Cambridge, Mass.

What seemed to be (a) important bits of advice for secondary-school educators, and (b) considerations on the future shape and financing of journalism, are highlighted in bold. I've tried to provide hypertext links to relevant biographies, websites and email addresses.

About 90 teachers attended, many from Massachusetts, New England and California, with a good cross section from other sections of the country. They were treated to four days of panel discussions and group discussion. I attended this institute for secondary-school educators, because I am the advisor to the Mount Greylock Regional High School (Williamstown, Mass.) student newspaper, and am a career newspaperman.

We are beginning work with the Media Giraffe Project to spotlight individuals making innovative use of media to foster participatory democracy. As educators, you may be well positioned to nominate or recommend such innovative efforts in your communities. In addition, the non-profit Action Coalition for Media Education (ACME), which I serve as a board member, seeks examples of pioneering curriculum.

Please contact me at **mediagiraffe@journ.umass.edu**.

Media & American Democracy
An Institute for Secondary-school Educators

June 27-July 1, 2004
Cambridge, Mass.

Joan Shorenstein Center on Press & Politics
At the John F. Kennedy School of Government
Harvard University

Notes written by attendee Bill Densmore (densmore@newshare.com -- 413-458-8001)

The Shorenstein Center was formed with an endowment from the family of the late CBS television news producer Joan Shorenstein (according to its website) "dedicated to exploring the intersection of press, politics and public policy in theory and practice. The Center strives to bridge the gap between journalists and scholars and, increasingly, between them and the public."

This year was the first year Shorenstein hosted the Media & American Democracy Institute, which had been hosted by the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Former *New York Times* journalist and author Alex Jones heads the Shorenstein Center and ex-CBS newsman Marvin Kalb is a senior fellow. Together, they hosted and moderated most of the proceedings.

Sunday began with Kalb's introduction to the concept of press freedom. Today's news organizations are organized to (1) make money, (2) deliver information fast and (3) reach and influence people. Press freedom is important, he said, because individuals "don't have an easy time taking on government" and the press can act as a proxy. He cited the English Cato letters and the John Peter Zenger case in the 1730s in New York as press-freedom antecedents.

Freedom is fragile and under assault daily by government and corporations, said Kalb. Large institutions are "moving in on the individual" especially in an era of concern about mass terrorism. The United States is in deep trouble when it takes actions which are inconsistent with historical principals of freedom, said Kalb.

There is no textbook available which covers media's effect on American democracy, according to Janice Barrett, an associate professor at Boston University and one of the institute's organizers.

"Young people are moving in droves to the Internet" for their information, Barrett said in remarks Sunday, June 27. To be informed citizens and to participate in democracy, she said, young people need to learn about the media's influence. They need access to recent research. Media is increasingly powerful in American life. It shapes issues and is changing the way campaigns are waged and elections held. Coverage or lack of coverage is a critical component in the political process, she said.

Information-recall research by colleague Margaret DeFleur at Boston University, said Barrett, confirms that citizens retain more information when they read rather than watch it, but they remember far more when they see or hear information.

Columbia University professor Todd Gitlin has found that American youth are exposed to an average 6.5 hours a day of media, including TV, VCRs, radios, tape and CD players, video games and computers, said Barrett. Sixty-five percent of American youth have a TV in their own bedroom, and 42 percent have TV on constantly in their homes. The prices paid for this media "super-saturation" Barrett said, aren't just monetary. They include an invasion of solitude, space and time to reflect, and surveillance by government, telemarketers and pollsters. And youth now expect everything to be fast paced -- an expectation which is putting tremendous demands on America's teachers.

Questions asked by Barrett (paraphrased):

1. How does media content shape, influence and impress how we, and in turn, our students, construct reality?
2. How can we assume the meaning of the constant media exposure students have? What are the implications for democracy? For the exercise of rights and responsibilities of citizenship?
3. How do we guide and teach students to navigate the constant, ever-present media saturation in their lives?

Barrett's key expectations and goals for the four-day institute:

- **Share student-learning issues**
- **Discuss and exchange ideas**
- **Develop media-literacy curriculum**

To encourage curriculum development, the Shorenstein organizers teamed up with the five-year-old, non-profit Bill of Rights Institute in Arlington, Va. The institute has a $2-million annual budget and a 10-member staff.

The Bill of Rights Institute's mission is to educate high-school students and teachers about America's founding principles through programs that teach the words and ideas of the Founders; the liberties and freedoms guaranteed in our Founding documents; and how America's Founding principles affect and shape a free society.

From July until Oct. 15, teacher participants in the institute created and submitted to cgriffin@billofrights.org lesson plans that equip teachers with tools and strategies that teach the critical role of media, and intelligent media consumption, in a free society. Between 15 and 20 lesson plans will be chosen for publication in print and online at the Shorenstein and Bill of Rights Institute websites. Each of the teacher authors will receive a $500 award.

Each lesson plan chosen will be designed for grades 9-12, and should fit into one 45-minute class period or one 90-minute block. They should be preceded by 10 minutes of preparatory homework, include a 10-15 minute warmup period, a 20-30-minute activity period and a post-session homework assignment. References to 3-4 books or journal articles, or 3-4 websites, should be included.

Journalists have an ethical duty to report stories that "need to be heard" whether or not it makes sense to do so from a business point of view, MSNBC President Rick Kaplan told attendees at a Sunday evening dinner presentation (June 27). To not do so breaks a sacred trust, he said. "We have, after all, a license to print money for free because we have a license to use your airwaves."

Kaplan, who has also run CNN, said he was moving to make MSNBC the sort of "tiffany" of cable news operations, digging into stories and treating them as having more than just two sides. There is too much time spent on gossip now, he said.

In the heyday of network news in the 1960s and early 1970s, said Kaplan, viewers who watched the evening news were hearing the stories for the first time. With the Internet and a variety of 24-hour news sources, now consumers never come to a newscast with a blank slate of news knowledge. As a result, said Kaplan, the job of news programming now consists in part of "trying to give people information they don't already know." He added: "We're going to try to pump more content into our news."

"I am not looking for the audience that wants a car chase, because all they'll stay for is the car chase," Kaplan said.

Kaplan's advice to educators trying to inspire journalists: "Teach them all to write, and write and write." He added: "I happen to think there is no difference between news reporting and education."

Kaplan acknowledged that most Americans get their news from organizations owned by large corporations. But, he added, "I have tremendous support from GE and NBC." No single stockholder owns more than 1% of GE, he said. At a meeting with Jeffery Immelt, the CEO of GE, Kaplan recalls that Immelt "showed me an extraordinary depth of knowledge about our industry . . . he said to me, 'You don't amount to that much in our earnings – but you are a very visible part . . . so just make us proud.' " Kaplan said he has banned discussion of ratings from MSNBC's editorial meetings on content development.

A Boston-based media critic, a First Amendment scholar and a journalist-turned academic traded notes on the "rights, roles and responsibilities" of the media at a Monday morning panel, June 28.

Ellen Hume, director of the UMass-Boston Center on Media and Society, said the problem is not just the product, it is also the audience. There's a need to teach young people to be critical consumers. She said her students are captivated by the ideas of MIT linguistics professor and media critic Noam Chomsky, who has never been in the news business. Later, answering a teacher's question about Chomsky, she said: "My problem with Chomsky is that he has no idea how it works," she said.

"We will not have a discussion about Noam Chomsky," Marvin Kalb told teacher Stephen McCamman of Nazareth, Pa. "We're moving on."

When news divisions are pressured to make money, and journalists are not supported from the top, they become more reluctant to challenge authority – which is their job, said Hume. "How

do you get an audience . . . for a job that should be unpopular and should not be made to be popular?" she asked.

Political parties once served in a role of helping the nation to be free and self governing, said Hume. But now the influence of television advertising and coverage has replaced the party nominating process, she said. But journalism is not equipped by itself to serve the role of providing information to be free and self governing.

"The economic structure does not allow it to be this honest broker," she said. Broadcast news operations are in a panic now, she said, because of competition from cable and the Internet. "You have to shout, you have to have celebrity."

The media is indeed moving to take more of a political point of view, said professor Frederick Schauer, the First Amendment expert at the Shorenstein Center and Kennedy school. "We should not be surprised to see a race to the bottom . . . without some external quality control."

While journalists think they are in the business of informing the public and fostering democracy, the public believes journalism is about "money and ratings" according to Mark Jurkowitz, Boston Globe columnist and media critic, adding: "The buyer and seller don't think they are in the same business." At the same time, he said, the public is starting to cherry pick its news consumption among outlets which fit their own politics and perceptions.

For example, says Jurkowitz, when networks got possession of tapes of beheadings and threats by Osama Bin Laden, said Jurkowitz, the Bush administration asked that they been screened before airing. All the networks listened to the White House, then in their own conference call all agreed to do so. Jurkowitz speculates that one reason for this willingness to capitulate to White House requests: "These companies have business in front of the United States."

What can be done to make the public feel more positive about the media, Kalb asked the three panelists? Their replies:

- **Mark Jurkowitz: Focus first on accuracy, then speed. People don't want their news station to have it first, they want it right.**
- **Ellen Hume: "Make your students understand it is their job to criticize."**
- **Fred Schauer: "It's possible and dangerous to worry too much about whether people like you."**

Politicians need to learn how to teach reporters to be good reporters, according to Arnie Arnesen, a former New Hampshire state representative who now hosts a statewide talk show in her native state. She recalled how she would give neophyte state-house reporters questions and background on issues, even names and phone numbers of folks with views opposed to her own.

Her advice to the educators: Show their students what isn't being reported and what's missing from a story. Teach young journalists to "ask a question 24 different times until they get an answer . . . I think you have to teach the passion of wanting to know more. It's a muscle. It needs exercise. That's your obligation. Start building that muscle. Start working that muscle." And get local newspapers to provided extended coverage of things on their websites, if they don't have room in print.

Arnesen was one of three panelists with views on the coverage of state and local government. The other two were former Boston Globe political reporter and columnist David Nyhan, and Victor Ashe, the former GOP mayor of Knoxville, Tenn.

Ashe pointed to public-access television as an important new resource. "I was always amazed at the number of people who saw me on public-access TV," he said.

The news business has declined in quality and quantity, and fear and sex sell, said Nyhan. "There is less yeasty ferment in the journalism business because people are desperate to hold onto their jobs," he added. The antidote may be the Internet, which could be the mechanism for "a revolt against corporate ownership," Nyhan said.

Arnesen decried the gradual segmentation of American society as the public splinters in its search for information from diverse sources such as the Internet. "The beauty of a newspaper like the Boston Globe is that it is the Velcro that holds us together," she said. "Now society is segmenting. As a nation, we have to address that." She cited Robert Putnam's book, "Bowling Alone" and its sequel, "Better Together" as on point.

Does it really matter who owns the press? Duke University professor Susan Tifft and MediaChannel.org executive editor Danny Schechter agree that it does. The two formed a panel on Monday, June 28, hosted by Stephen A. Greyser, a retired Harvard Business School professor.

"A newspaper have to be willing to antagonize those in power even if it hurts its bottom line," said Tifft. In the lobby of the old New York World, owned by Joseph Pulitzer, was inscribed, "The World has no friends." In the lobby of the Los Angeles Times, shortly before its sale to Tribune Co., was a ticker showing all of its employees its stock price. The conflict between earnings and public service, "is now becoming more like a war" in the industry, she said.

Schechter said he thinks most youth are watching talkmaster Jay Leno's Tonight Show on NBC and reading the satirical The Onion to get their news. He said America's youth feel betrayed and are untrusting because of an increasingly uniform information stream. We are living, said Schechter, in a "mediocracy", where politicians spend their time raising money to purchase airtime. "I see this as a crisis of democracy."

"People who joined the media to do something about the problems of the world, found that the media were one of the problems of the world," he added. Schechter said his MediaChannel.org has 25,000 members. "There is far more coverage about what CEO's are making than what automaker's are making."

A one-time cabinet secretary and two former governors are all worried about the effect of a diminished press on democracy. Former New Hampshire Gov. Jeanne Shaheen, former Massachusetts Gov. Michael Dukakis and former Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman [former head of the JFK School's Institute for Politics; now head of the Motion Picture Association of America] formed a June 28 panel along with Jarrett Barrios, an incumbent Massachusetts state senator.

Getting news from television rather than weakened newspapers is a real problem for democracy, because it encourages cynicism and discourages participation, said Shaheen, a Democrat, who was Sen. John F. Kerry's campaign chair.

The Wichita [Kan.] Eagle Beacon was a focus of its community when the Kansas daily was owned locally, recalled Glickman, whose political career began in his home town there. Then it was purchased by Knight Ridder Corp., one of the top five national newspaper chains. "Now they don't cover anything that has to do with politicians or government," said Glickman. As a result, he said, (a) its easy for politicians to escape scrutiny for their actions and (b) they become their own newspaper, feeding press releases to a devouring media. "It is very dangerous for our democracy," he said.

"When newspapers are weak, the politicians have the bully pulpit," added Barrios, the Massachusetts lawmaker. "If you're only covering the side with the bully pulpit, democracy loses." Barrios said he finds it almost impossible to get coverage of important civil-rights issues in the weeklies and metro daily which cover the cities he represents.

When he was Massachusetts governor, Dukakis recalled, several TV stations had staff reporters permanently assigned to the state house. Now, he says, there are none. Dukakis now teaches at both UCLA and at Northeastern University.

Advice to teachers from this panel:

- **Dan Glickman: "Teach your students something about fairness . . . and not to just accept all this crap. You have to nurture it. This country can't be strong very much longer if it has such an uninformed populace."**
- **Michael Dukakis: Teach students how to get involved in government and politics, with classroom work and experiences. Students need role models in politics and journalism. "You're the folks who have to connect these kids."**

The theory that the media have replaced parties as the dominant factor in campaigns was explored in a Tuesday morning lecture and Q-and-A by Thomas Patterson, professor of press and government at the Shorenstein Center.

Patterson said television networks, looking for a way to go beyond print reporting, adopted an "interpretative" rather than "descriptive" style. This style gradually spread to newspapers as well, making the voice of the reporter or correspondent dominant over the voice of the newsmaker. Television made this change to build audience; newspapers follow suit to keep from losing audience, Patterson said.

In 10 or 15 years, Patterson predicted, people may create their own newspaper with highly refined Internet search and personalization tools.

European news organizations tend to probe the values which underly issues, said Patterson, while U.S. newspapers shy away from doing so. The U.S. media cover the "horse race" aspect of campaigns, rather than the issues which divide the candidates.

The generally negative image portrayed of politics is turning off younger voters, Patterson says. "You can't nurture a strong interest in politics, you can't nurture a strong interest in institutions,

if most of what you hear about them is damming." Patterson's research tracks a correlation between negative news and negative voter opinion.

More recently, said Patterson, there has been a big drop in the willingness of television networks to cover politics. At the same, time, they have heightened their coverage of crime. In one study from 1992-1994 cited by Patterson, there was a public increase in the concern about crime at the same time there was an actual drop in crime. As a result of tougher sentencing, American has more people behind bars per capital than any other country in the world, Patterson noted.

Veteran political reporter Jack Germond, whose book, "Fat Man Fed Up: How American Politics Went Bad," was published July 6, chronicled a growing gap between what interests the press corps and what interests the public. He said voters' interests are more serious than those of reporters. Germond was part of a Tuesday, June 29, panel on the presidential election which included Michael Tomasky, former Shorenstein fellow and executive editor of "The American Prospect", and Robert Blendon, health-policy and management professor at Harvard's public-health school. Moderator was Wellesley College political scientist Marion Just.

Advising educators in response to a question, Germond quipped: "I wish I had been told how to read a newspaper, and how to take it in."

Blendon joined three other panelists and Alex Jones as moderator at a Tuesday luncheon seminar on domestic policy.

Among panelists was "Washington Monthly" contributing editor and New York Times senior writer Jason DeParle. DeParle's book, "American Dream : Three Women, Ten Kids, And A Nation's Drive To End Welfare" was published Sept. 9, 2004. Poverty tends not to be covered in the political realm because the poor tend to vote less than the general populace and are therefore not swing voters. Twelve percent of the U.S. population lives below the federal poverty level, he said.

Readers of science news should be taught to ask what motivates the subject of a story, panelist and New York Times science writer Cornelia Dean told teachers. Dean said private-sector research money needs to be considered as a source of influence on researcher's methods and findings.

A teacher told panelists she felt let down by the American media's coverage of pre-war Iraq. In questioning following a Wednesday, June 30, panel on "Terrorism and War," the Philadelphia teacher said when she learned that 1.5 million people died in Iraq from the effects of economic sanctions, "I couldn't believe this was true because I had not read it in my press. I feel failed by my American press that I used to trust."

Media coverage of war and terrorism encounters roadblocks and bias, said the panelists, which included retired Marine Lt. Gen. Bernard Trainor, Kennedy School academic dean Stephen Walt and moderator Bernard Kalb, former CBS, NBC and New York Times correspondent and U.S. State Department spokesman. It was not until 1943 – two years after the U.S. entry into the war – that the first photo of a U.S. World War II casualty was shown in Life magazine, Trainor noted.

"In the wake of Sept. 11, it wasn't good business for anybody to be unpatriotic," Walt said of the media. He called it unreasonable to expect large corporations to take on really unpopular issues. He said that's why it is not surprising that things which cast doubt on American policy are not covered. Walt offered no solution to this dilemma. Issues which are widely covered by international press do not receive coverage in the U.S. if the public isn't broadly interested, he added later in the panel. But, he said, the U.S. media is very responsive to political conflict.

The press has no explicit constitutional right to its watchdog function, and that allows government to manage access to war and news in ways which take it "prisoner" to government policy objectives and assumptions about national security, said Trainor and Kalb.

Throughout the four-day institute, panelists observed that many Americans are turning to the web, and to television talk-shows and political satires as a primary source of political "news." In an atmosphere where the established media is seen as voluntarily or explicitly limited in what it covers, "How do we keep kids from running to the pseudo-media?" asked a Binghamton, N.Y., teacher.

Fears of losing access to sources, and even losing their jobs, influence Washington journalists to be careful how they cover controversial stories, said Columbian journalist Maria Cristina Caballero. She was among four panelists for a Wednesday, June 30, session: "Foreign Correspondents Cover America."

Alleged U.S. human-rights abuses in Iraq are having the effect of strengthening a despot in Africa, said former Zimbabwe editor Geoff Nyarota. Zimbabwe strongman Robert Mugabe's justifications for mass killing of opponents, and the lack of worldwide reaction, is also reminiscent of the genocidal killing of the Tutsis tribe in Rwanda in the 1990s, said Nyarota, expatriot editor of the newspaper Harare. Nyarota fled his country as Mugabe's forces sought to detain him for what he published.

"The events in Iraq have worked in favor of Mr. Mugawbe," said Nyarota. "It is now as if he has been vindicated . . . [He] is getting stronger by the day because of the events in Iraq." Said Nyarota: "Why does the U.S. not move into Zimbabwe?" asked Nyarota. "Is it because it is not in America's self interest to do so?"

Answering a teacher's question, Nyraota said he believes American media is to blame for "not stimulating" the interest of their listeners or readers in world affairs. While it may not be the media's role to education, they should at least inform, he responded.

It is getting "very much more difficult" for a correspondent to cover news that matters rather than news that sells, said German correspondent Ruediger Lentz. Big networks "have to go for what sells". Lentz is Washington bureau chief and senior correspondent for Deutsche Welle Radio and Television.

The altruistic tendencies of young people in America may be gravitating more toward small-scale volunteerism rather than government service, Harvard University President Lawrence H. Summers told the Shorenstein participants during a Wednesday, June 30, question-and-answer session. Somers said he thinks young people want to be interested "in something large than me or money . . . . "

The public has lost patience with educators not willing to submit to critical analysis of their success at teaching, added Summers, a former U.S. treasury secretary and career economist at the World Bank and in academia. Among solutions are measurement standards and creating more schooling choices, he added.

A panel on "The Right to Know vs. National Security" included Anthony Lewis, author and retired New York Times columnist; Maj. Gen. William Nash; former Bush and Clinton administration White House national security / terrorism coordinator Richard Clarke; and retired CIA covert officer Jack Grierson.

Grierson and Clarke comment on the just-published book by CIA analyst Michael Scheuer. The book, "Imperial Hubris: Why the West is Losing the War on Terrorism," argues that the Muslim world opposes American policies, not the American political system. The release of the book is part of a policy war between the White House and the CIA, said Grierson.

Nash said the American press has been cowed by officialdom, stiffling debate on the issues which surround the Middle East, Islam, Europe and Asia.

Lewis reminded teachers that there is no legally enforceable "right to know" through which the media gain access to information or officials. Rather, he said, access to information depends upon the journalist's effectiveness at conveying to sources real understanding about a topic, so sources can feel confident their views will be fairly represented.

Shorenstein Center director Alex Jones wrapped up the week's sessions. He outlined the structural issue which, he said, is undermining American journalism.

Newspapers used to be very partisan, he said, but for the last 100 years, media have been commercial, not political. "The people who went into the business were looking for as broad an audience as they could find – because they were seeking advertising as much as possible," said Jones. As a result, publishers have had to print news that did not antagonize one side or the other in terms of its factuality. The question going forward, said Jones, is whether journalism should abandon the business-driven convention of objectivity. "It's a very important question as a nation whether we want that to happen," he said.

There are flavors of objectivity, Jones observed. There is "scientific objectivity" in the sense of a complete and detached exposition of varied points of view. There is also "point-of-view objectivity" in which the author recognizes and acknowledges presenting a case, but does not necessarily give equal treatment to other approaches to the case.

The rise of TV news – broadcast and cable – has soured economics of national, mass-market advertising for many newspapers, said Jones. And in most cities, it is no longer possible for two or more newspapers to compete for advertising and survive. "The traditional economic vehicle for supporting this enterprise is giving way," said Jones, adding: "Now we have entered a period in which the vehicle for saving money is cutting back on the news itself. And the news which has been found to be most expendable is the news that has no clear corporate support."

Less and less news is investigative, or the "news of verification," said Jones, because that is labor intensive and therefore expensive to produce. It is being replaced, he said, by "the

journalism of assertion" rather than factual reporting. "The problem is not that there is undue influence," he said. "The problem is that there are not enough resources."

The future is likely to include more "sponsored news," said Jones, "causing a further erosion in what people can believe, and argue about." Is local news going to be increasingly messaged to promoted the interests of sponsors? "That's what you have a right to ask your local newspaper or TV station," said Jones. More and more, newspapers will publish "progress editions and more things you can sell advertising around."

To demonize the results of this competitive pressure misses the point, Jones said. "The villains in this – there are not really villains – it's just the evolution of the game," he said, adding later to his audience of teachers: "I don't want you to leave here thinking that journalists are the problem . . . I want you to know that the problem is not with journalists – it is the situation . . . it's not a moral problem, it's an economic problem."

Is the profession of journalism going to survive, asked Jones? How will it be paid for? "Are we in a period where we are going to have to start looking for new [business] models," he asked? Some people at Harvard think the era of journalism as we know it is over, and the future will belong to something called the "citizen journalist." Financing these citizen-journalist efforts may involve government funding, citizen funding or non-profit funding, he said.

"In how many towns do you now have a weekly newspaper that is doing serious reporting?" asked Jones. "I think you are going to be seeing more of that."

Jones' advice to teachers: Seek out journalists in the community, especially "the ones who are still believers" . . . and make them part of what goes on in the classroom.

-- END DOCUMENT --

Selected resources:

http://www.commondreams.org/cgi-bin/print.cgi?file=/views03/1112-10.htm
Keynote Address to the National Conference on Media Reform
by Bill Moyers, Founding Director, Public Affairs TelevisionPresident,
The Schumann Center for Media and Democracy November 8, 2003 Madison, Wis.
Published on Wednesday, November 12, 2003 by CommonDreams.org