

Break the Monopoly

Heavy hitters turn out for the National Conference on Media Reform.

The little yellow buttons gazed out from hundreds of shirtfronts. Demanding *What the FCC is going on?*, the small badges captured the indignant spirit bringing 1,700 people to wintry Madison, Wis., for three days in November.

Ambitious in a David-taking-on-Goliath kind of way, activists, journalists and academics had gathered at the National Conference on Media Reform to figure out how to combat an increasingly consolidated media world and a Federal Communications Commission (FCC) that seems in bed with it.

How are the national media a Goliath? Ben Bagdikian, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, explains how in *The Media Monopoly*, first released in 1983 and with each new edition revered as essential background to the current debate on media control.

According to Bagdikian, the number of corporations running nearly all daily newspapers, magazines, radio, television, books and movies in the country has rapidly shrunk from 50 in 1984, to 26 in 1987 and to 10 in 1996, reflecting an ever-concentrated pool of control. Today, only six giant corporations own most national media.

The mayor of Madison, Dave Cieslewicz, speaking at the conference's opening event, compared such conglomerates to invasive weeds that can kill local diversity and take over the landscape. "Local media is home-grown and diverse," he said. (Incidentally, people streaming out after Cieslewicz's address found by the exit copies of "A Channel of Our Own," Dan Carol's Nov. 6 *Eugene Weekly* column on the same topic.)

Part of the backdrop of the media reform conference had been painted this summer, when the FCC voted to loosen the rules on media consolidation. It's the job of the FCC

to regulate a media oligopoly in the making. But the FCC, headed by Michael Powell, son of Colin Powell, seems to practically encourage it. (See *EW* archives 4/24, "De-Reg Demons.")

The FCC voted in June to allow, among other things, networks to own TV stations that reach up to 45 percent of the national audience, and to allow one company to own a newspaper and a TV station in the same city.

For self-serving reasons, few national media outlets covered the buildup to the FCC's review of media rules.

FCC Commissioners Michael Copps and Jonathan Adelstein, who did not support the new rules, had begun to hold town meetings across the country in an attempt to increase public awareness. As awareness rose, so did public outrage. Although the new FCC rules passed 3-2, the FCC by all accounts was shaken by the public response to what was supposed to have been a quiet action. And then, driven by public calls, Congress voted overwhelmingly to freeze the new rules.

Speaking at the conference, Copps and Adelstein warned that the public's work is not yet over. The Senate will not be voting to freeze the rules until January, they say, and more activist organization is needed to make sure the Senate also votes to stop the FCC.

Despite this cautionary note, it was a celebratory crowd who listened to the commissioners in Madison.

Called a liberal "lovefest" by the Madison weekly *Isthmus*, the conference was a dizzying mix of speaker panels, big name speeches, documentary films and music acts that left little time for unimportant things like lunch or sleep. At times I felt I was in a giant pep rally: from the opening session with organizers John Nichols of *The Nation* and Robert McChesney of the University of

Illinois, to Friday night's kick-off of the Tell Us the Truth music tour with Billy Bragg, to Saturday's keynote with Bill Moyers, Studs Terkel and Al Franken, attendees were pumped up to take back the media, help democracy, fight the good fight. Several U.S. representatives and senators, the few on Capitol Hill speaking up publicly about media reform, showed up in support.

The charismatic 92-year-old Terkel climbed the stairs to the stage with some difficulty but then held his own with the microphone. He introduced Moyers Saturday night by endorsing him for president. Moyers responded by asking Terkel to be his VP, and in his graceful keynote speech, made a persuasive case for active citizen involvement in the media. Though the audience cheered him to continue, Moyers, saying he had run out of time, obligingly said he would post the rest of his speech on the conference website.

Ralph Nader, slotted for Friday, met with a plane delay, and had to be rescheduled to an ungodly 8 am Saturday. Speaking eloquently about how most Americans rely on TV news simply for sports and weather, Nader drew a number of laughs with his impression of an eager weatherman.

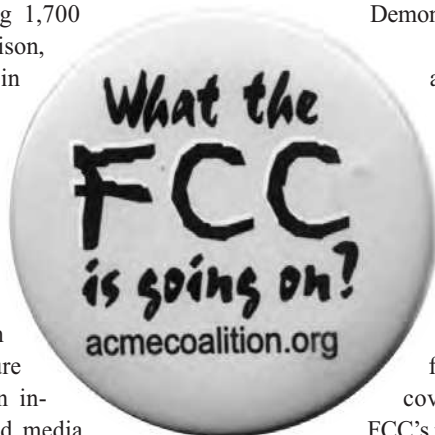
But my favorite Nader moment came when a middle-aged guy in jeans stood up from the audience during the Q&A session. "Mr. Nader, I really like you. I voted for you in '96, I gave you money in 2000," he said respectfully. "But please, please, don't run next year. There's too much at stake."

stations receive only 15 percent of funds from the government with the rest of their budget dependent on public donations every year. In their case, public participation directly relates to the quality of their programming. She'd like to be remembered, Mitchell said, as the person who put Bill Moyers on PBS.

Many of these nationally renowned speakers, often speaking in solo sessions, moved me by their consistent message that a democracy is strengthened by a public informed by a diverse media. But when it came to many of the speaker panels, I left distinctly uninspired. Several panelists rambled through their time without noticeable resolution of the topic at hand.

This may be because however admirably organized, the Madison conference sometimes seemed to creak under the weight of its own ambition. Panels addressed sprawling topics like "How Do We Win? Strategies, Models and Ideas." From early morning to late night, with as many as eight panels and a documentary film to choose from at any given time, there were just too many people to hear, too many things to see.

It was the shuttle ride back to the airport Sunday afternoon with two others staying at my hotel that gave me the first relaxed person-to-person contact I'd been craving the whole weekend. Riding with me were Ahmed Bouzid, a soft-spoken Algerian presiding over the watchdog group Palestinian Media Watch, and Naomi Ishisaka, the articulate editor of *ColorsNW*, a Seattle-based di-



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I watched with interest as Nader's face visibly stiffened. He levelly asked the man if he would curtail anyone's First Amendment rights. The man replied, very respectfully, "No, sir."

Running for public office is a form of political free speech," Nader said, telling the man never to ask anyone to stop expressing their political views. Ouch.

Pat Mitchell, president of PBS, spoke early Sunday morning. Describing the financial limitations of public TV, she said PBS

versity magazine. As we chatted over our conference experience and discussed the U.S. media's coverage of the Israeli Palestinian conflict, I found myself wishing that more of the weekend had been spent allowing people to learn by just talking to each other, rather than listening to a few panelists in a roomful of many other interesting people.

For more information, see www.mediareform.net. You can get your own yellow FCC button at www.acmecoalition.org **EW**



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