

OPINION

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Mark Twain Would be Pleased

Exposing a gap between rhetoric and reality

BY LEE A. DANIELS

Mark Twain would be pleased, wouldn't he?

The heated reaction to the publishing of a new edition of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* with the word "nigger" changed to "slave" continues unabated in the mainstream media and the blogosphere.

One thing it proves is, on the one hand, the power of Twain's imagination and fictive skill and, on the other, his grasp of reality.

He knew that the issue of race was the sharpest point of the enormous question of what it means to be an American (with the question of white Americans' attitudes toward Indians – "injuns" – close behind) – and what kind of nation America is.

So it was in the late nineteenth century, when white Northerners betrayed the promise of Reconstruction and gave white Southerners dominion over black South-



erners as "compensation" for the defeat of the Confederacy.

So it remains today.

Why else would the decision to remove the word "nigger" from just one of the scores of the available editions of *Huckleberry Finn* cause, as Twain might say, bring such a ruckus?

Not only has the controversy provoked the usual puffed-chest, and wrong-headed, cries of censorship, but it has also produced thought-provoking commentary about child-rearing practices, about the competence of elementary and secondary school teachers and the narrowness of high school curricula, and about pedagogical practices in general.

It has done so precisely because the word "nigger" remains one of the most contested words in the American lexicon.

This is part of the point author Lorrie Moore makes when she writes that "No novel with the word 'kike' or 'bitch' spelled out 200 times could or should be separated – for purposes of irony or pedagogy – from the attitudes that produced those words. It's also impossible

that such a novel would be taught in a high school classroom. And if it were taught, student alienation might very well contribute to another breed of achievement gap."

Both Joel Dreyfuss, editor of *TheRoot.com* and Moore, indirectly and directly, respectively, argue persuasively that *Huckleberry Finn* is too complex to be taught in high school. That's a discussion worth having. Indeed, one can say it's part of the continuing value of Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*: The teaching of it remains so problematic for the larger society precisely because it's easy and voluminous use of "nigger" represents the attitudes and practices of the white American majority of that era.

In doing so, Twain exposes the chasm between the rhetoric of the American Ideal and the appalling reality of America as it was. And, although many do not want to hear it, his story continues to ask a powerful question: How wide is the gap between the rhetoric and the reality today?

Lee A. Daniels is Director of Communications for the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund and Editor-in-Chief of *TheDefendersOnline*.

Meet the New Media Monopoly

NBC-Comcast merger falls short on public good

BY DAVE SALDANA

For more than a century, American law has recognized the destructive power of corporate monopolies.

When one company controls an entire resource, means of production or delivery system for products, it gets an unfair advantage over competitors. It can overcharge them out of existence or drive them into bankruptcy.

Since Teddy Roosevelt's presidency, our government has tried to ensure that monopolistic business practices don't destroy fair pricing and consumer choice.

Then how can it justify the merger of Comcast and NBC Universal, which the Federal Communications Commission approved on Jan. 18?

The FCC is supposed to reject any media merger that doesn't advance the public interest. But Comcast's takeover

of NBC will give one mega-corporation control of too much of what we watch and how we watch it.

The deal creates not just a new media behemoth with the ability to throttle competition and stifle innovation, but a completely new model for media organizations and how they operate. Where Comcast and NBC go today, AT&T, Verizon, Disney, Time Warner, and Viacom are soon to follow. The era of the mega-mega-merger is upon us.

Comcast is already the country's largest cable and home broadband provider. The new Comcast will own production, content, and distribution for local television stations, national networks broadcasting in English and Spanish, and numerous cable channels and movie studios.

One company will soon account for 20 percent of all network and cable TV viewing hours. That should worry you.

Why? Because when one company, motivated solely by profit, can choose what news to cover and how to cover it, you may not be getting the full story. When it can exclude competing ideas or

perspectives, whether for political or economic reasons, you may be denied a full hearing on the issues. And that's bad for democracy.

Want to see what this looks like in action? Search MSNBC's website for its coverage of the controversy surrounding the merger. If you look very closely, you might find a short blurb from Fort Wayne, Ind. that mentions consumer concerns in passing. NBC Nightly News reported the deal, but anchor Brian Williams failed to mention the intense opposition to the merger or the serious concerns about it.

If a media company can keep opposing views off your TV and computer screens, you'll never know any different.

Comcast has a history of using its control over cable and the Internet to bottleneck information and cripple competitors. The company has already been caught blocking the legal file sharing of such things as barbershop quartet music and the King James Bible. More recently, it's been accused of deliberately congesting its broadband network to slow down content delivery and of raising fees for such competitors as Netflix who deliver

online video to their customers.

Now, with a slew of popular NBC programs in its hands and the accompanying leverage, what's to stop Comcast from doing even worse?

The FCC and the Justice Department imposed temporary conditions to make the merger more palatable, but there's not enough sugar to sweeten this rotten deal. And the conditions, inadequate to begin with, are only as strong as the FCC's willingness to enforce them.

The agency's hands-off approach to the biggest media merger in recent memory isn't a good sign. There are plenty of laws against one thing or another, but without a cop on the beat, what good are they?

Monopolies are dangerous. We can expect corporations to be concerned only with padding their bottom line, regardless of the public good. But when regulators like the FCC become more concerned with pleasing corporations than protecting the public, we're all in big trouble.

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