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Here we are again.

And our numbers are growing.

We were 1700 in Madison four years ago, 2500 in St. Louis a year later, 3200 in Memphis last year. And now here in St. Paul we are 3500 – and counting. You represent millions of Americans who see media consolidation as a corrosive social force. It robs them of their voice in public affairs, pollutes the political culture, and turns the debate over profound issues into a shouting match of polarized views promulgated by partisan apologists who trivialize democracy while refusing to speak the truth about how our country is being plundered.

The patriarch of your movement warned a generation ago of what was coming. In his magisterial book *Media Monopoly* Ben Bagdikian wrote: “The result of the overwhelming power of relatively narrow corporate ideologies has been the creation of widely established political and economic illusions with little visible contradictions in the media to which a majority of the population is exclusively exposed.”

In other words, what we need to know to make democracy work for all Americans is compromised by media institutions deeply embedded in the power structures of society. Whether employing professional journalists trained at prestigious universities, or polemicists who serve partisan agendas, our dominant media are ultimately accountable only to corporate boards whose mission is not “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” for the whole body of our republic, but the aggrandizement of corporate executives and shareholders; organizations whose self-styled mandate is not holding public and private power accountable so there is an equilibrium in society, but aggregating their interlocking interests; organizations whose reward comes from the manufacturing of news and information as profitable consumer commodities rather than the means to empower morally responsible citizens.

Why does it matter? What does the media do, anyway?

I’ll let an old Cherokee chief answer that. I heard this story a long time ago – of the tribal elder who was telling his grandson about the battle the old man was waging inside himself. He said, “It is between two wolves, my son. One is an evil wolf: Anger, envy, sorrow, greed, arrogance, self-

pity, guilt, resentment, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego. The other is the good wolf: Joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith.” The boy thought this over for a minute, and then asked his grandfather: “Which wolf wins?” The old Cherokee replied simply: “The one I feed.”

Democracy is that way: The wolf that wins is the one we feed, and the media provides the fodder.

Democracy without honest information creates the illusion of popular consent while enhancing the power of the state and the privileged interests protected by it.

Democracy without accountability creates the illusion of popular control while offering ordinary Americans cheap tickets to the balcony, too far away to see that the public stage is just a reality TV set.

Nothing more characterizes corporate media today – mainstream and partisan – than disdain towards the fragile nature of modern life and indifference toward the complex social debate required of a free and self-governing people.

This leaves you with a heavy burden – it’s up to you to fight for the freedom that makes all other freedoms possible.

(Let me in fact ask you to stand up. Stand up and look at your neighbor to your left or your neighbor on your right; come on, stand up. Turn to a neighbor on one side of you. Look each other in the eye. Shake hands. Now turn to your neighbor on the other side of you. Look each other in the eye and shake hands. See, you’re surrounded by kindred spirits. Remember them when you go home to continue this fight. Hold their presence and this moment in your heart. Keep reminding yourself, “I am not alone in this movement.”)

(Be Seated.)

In numbers there is strength, and with strength comes success. It was just five years ago that millions of Americans, aroused by your movement, bombarded Washington to protest the FCC’s decision to radically lower the barriers to corporate media consolidation. Last December the Bush

Administration tried again. Their majority on the FCC rush resurrected the plan to permit one company to control a large city's newspaper and broadcast stations. Those stalwart servants of the public interest, Commissioner Michael Copps and Commissioner Jonathan Adelstein, of course dissented once again. And once again the vigorous protest you created rocked the cozy confines of the media ownership elite. So that last month the Senate, on a bi-partisan vote assembled by Senator Byron Dorgan of North Dakota, overwhelmingly passed a resolution of disapproval countering the FCC's decision.

But even as we meet, the Administration is pressing to give the conglomerates more control – from newspapers and broadcast television, to satellite radio, to awarding some of the most valuable remaining swaths of our public airwaves to two of the largest telecommunications companies, to mergers and acquisitions by the biggest digital media giants. Inspired by FreePress, the bi-partisan coalition SavetheInternet.com has become crucial to the fight to keep the World Wide Web a bastion for free speech.

For example:

When the cable giant Cablevision tried this spring to pack an FCC hearing room on network neutrality, by literally hiring people off the street to ensure that advocates of net neutrality could not get in to participate, SavetheInternet.com and its supporters helped expose the ruse. Soon after there was a new hearing, this time without the gerrymandered seating by opponents of an open Internet. Now Congressman Ed Markey has introduced a bill to advance net neutrality, and it's also become an issue in the presidential campaign.

Be vigilant; the fate of the cyber commons is at stake here, the future of “the mobile web” and the benefits of the Internet as open architecture. We'll lose without you: the only antidote to the power of organized money in Washington is the power of organized people at the netroots. When Verizon tried to censor NARAL's use of text-messaging last year, it was quick action by your coalition that led the company to reverse its position. Your efforts also led to an FCC proceeding on this critical issue. Yes, be vigilant; wherever the Internet flows – on our PCs, cell phones, mobile devices, and even to our new digital televisions – we must assure it remains an open and non-discriminatory medium of expression – what our colleague Jeff Chester calls truly a digital democracy.

But it's going to take more than just hopes that the new media will deliver up what we never fully realized with the old. And the clock is ticking. By 2011, the market analysts tell us, the Internet will surpass newspapers in advertising revenues. With MySpace and Dow Jones controlled by Rupert Murdoch, Microsoft determined to acquire Yahoo! And with advertisers already telling some bloggers their content may be unacceptable, we could see the potential loss of what's now considered an unstoppable "long tail" of content offering abundant new, credible, and sustainable sources of news and information.

Advertisers have aggressively seized the new online world to go back into the programming business themselves, creating "branded content." Imagine – the Camel News Caravan revived, but this time online as a sponsored YouTube channel. Already, newspapers and magazines (and soon TV programming) are encouraged to sell key words to advertisers – so-called "in-text advertising" – in the online versions of stories. Can you imagine advertisers going for stories with key words such as "health care reform," "environmental degradation," "Iraqi casualties," "contracting fraud," or "K Street lobbyists." I don't think so. So what will happen to news in the future as the already tattered boundaries between journalism and advertising is dispensed with entirely, as content, programming, commerce and online communities are rolled into one profitably attractive package? Last year the investment firm of Piper Jaffrey predicted that much of the business model for new media would be just that kind of hybrid. They called it "communitainment."

Where are you, George Orwell, now that we need you?

Here I want to implore you to take up the cause of public broadcasting as one of your priorities in this digital age. I know, I know: Public broadcasting is deeply flawed – too bland, too timid, too risk-free, too marginalized by tribalism and the furies of political and ideological pressures. But it remains with community broadcasting the one national programming service ostensibly free of commercials and commercial values. I was present at its creation, have spent most of my adult life in its vineyards, and I still believe it could yet fulfill the promise held out for it by the visionary E.B. White, who over 40 years ago imagined public television as our Chataqua and our Lyceum, addressing itself "to the ideal of excellence, not to the idea of acceptability," and devoted to restating and clarifying "the social dilemma and the political pickle."

In some ways public broadcasting has lived up to that potential and in other ways it has not. But our shortfalls have been due largely to the longstanding softness of federal funding and policy support, to continued attacks on our editorial independence, and to the struggle to survive. In this era of deregulation the myths of the marketplace have prospered as our opponents argue that “the private system really can provide all that is necessary” and “the public interest is what the public is interested in.” So as the commercial voice of the megamedia companies has been loud, strident, threatening and clear, the voice of public broadcasting has been a relatively small whisper. Neither Congress nor the FCC has seen fit to provide public media the requisite policy support. By comparison the private, commercial cable, DBS, and telecommunications industries have been able to use their vast resources to influence the policy agenda. As a result their operations have been almost totally deregulated, they have been given substantial public assets at no cost and with few obligations to their licenses, and they have been allowed to integrate vertically and to consolidate ownership across radio, television, and newspapers. Against that mighty armada of power and influence, public broadcasting has had little to work with. It has had no think tanks, no affiliations with academic programs, no resources for generating appropriate research and no means of fostering widespread understanding of its potential and its needs. If this doesn’t change, public broadcasting will continue having its national policy agenda set for it by others with no regard for the mission of public media.

But you can make a huge difference here. I am not asking for uncritical support. Those of us inside the Public Broadcasting System must put our own house in order – show courage, reveal to America the true face of a pluralistic society of many colors, origins, accents, and interests, and hold steady to high standards of excellence, providing a real alternative to the dominant and dumbed-down media. You should keep our feet to the fire, insist from us accountability of the highest order, demand of us that we live up to our potential of public broadcasting. We need your strong support, not as a lapdog, but as a watchdog.

Across the media landscape the health of our democracy is imperiled, buffeted by gale force winds of technological, political, and demographic forces. Without a truly free and independent press, this 250-year-old experiment in self-government will not make it. I am no romantic about journalism – we are fallen creatures, too, like everyone else – but I believe more fervently than ever that as journalism goes, so goes democracy. Yet as

mergers and buy-outs change both old and new media, bringing a frenzied focus on cost-cutting while fattening the pockets of the new owners and their investors, we are seeing journalism degraded through the layoffs and buyouts of legions of reporters and editors. *Advertising Age* reports that U.S. media employment has fallen to a 15-year low. *The Los Angeles Times* alone has experienced a withering series of resignations by editors who refused to turn a red pencil into an editorial scalpel. The new owner of the Tribune Company – the real estate mogul Sam Zell – recently toured the *Los Angeles Times* newsroom, telling employees that “the challenge is, how do we get somebody 126 years old to get it up? Well,” Zell said “I’m your Viagra.” He told his journalists that he didn’t have an editorial agenda or a perspective “about newspapers’ role as civic institutions. I’m a businessman. All that matters in the end is the bottom line.”

Just this week, he told Wall Street analysts that to save money he intends to eliminate 500 pages of news a week across all of the company’s 12 papers. That could mean some 82 pages a week lost from the *Los Angeles Times* alone. Reporting will be replaced by what Zell claims his readers want – maps, graphics, lists, rankings and stats. [Sounds to me as if Sam has confused Viagra with Lunesta.]

If you missed it, pull up the perceptive but disheartening eulogy for journalism written as an op-ed earlier this year by former *Baltimore Sun* journalist and creator of HBO’s “The Wire,” David Simon. Writing in the *Washington Post*, Simon explained:

Is there a separate elegy to be written for that generation of newspapermen and women who came of age after Vietnam, after the Pentagon Papers and Watergate? For us starry-eyed acolytes of a glorious new church, all of us secular and cynical and dedicated to the notion that though we would still be stained with ink, we were no longer quite wretches? Where is our special requiem?

Bright and shiny we were in the late 1970s, packed into our bursting journalism schools, dog-eared paperbacks of All the President’s Men” and The Powers that Be” atop our Associated Press stylebooks. No business school called to us, no engineering lab, no information-age computer degree – we had seen a future of substance in bylines and column inches. Immortality lay in a five-part series with sidebars in The Tribune, The Sun, The Register, The Post, The Express...

It's not just about us journalists. Simon goes on to chronicle the effects that cost-cutting and consolidation has had in the business and on the communities where businesses had made so much money, noting that "I did not encounter a sustained period in which anyone endeavored to spend what it would actually cost to make the *Baltimore Sun* the most essential and deep-thinking and well-read account of life in central Maryland. The people you needed to gather for that kind of storytelling were ushered out the door, buyout after buyout."

Or pull up the perceptive analysis on the state of newspaper journalism in the recent *New Yorker*, written by my good friend Eric Alterman: "It is impossible not to wonder what will become of not just news but democracy itself, in a world in which we can no longer depend on newspapers to invest their unmatched resources and professional pride in helping the rest of us to learn, however imperfectly, what we need to know."

What do we need to know?

Here's one example:

We needed to know the truth about Iraq. The truth could have spared that country from rack and ruin, saved thousands of American lives and the lives of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, and freed hundreds of billions of dollars for investment in the American economy and infrastructure. But as Knight-Ridder reporters told us at the time (one of the few organizations that systematically and independently set out to challenge the claims of this Administration, by the way), as my colleagues reported in our documentary on PBS "Buying the War," as Scott McClellan has now confessed, and as the Senate Intelligence Committee confirmed just this week, this Administration – with the complicity of the dominant media – conducted a political propaganda campaign, using erroneous and misleading intelligence to deceive Americans into supporting an unprovoked attack on another country, leading to a war that instead of being "quick and bloodless" as predicted, continues to this day. (At least we now know that a neo-conservative is an arsonist who sets the house on fire and six years later boasts that no one can put it out.)

You couldn't find a more revealing measure of the state of the dominant media today than the continuing ubiquitous presence on the air and in print of the very pundits and experts – self-selected message multipliers of

a disastrous foreign policy – who got it all wrong in the first place. It just goes to show: When the bar is low enough, you can never be too wrong.

So the press as a whole remains in denial about its complicity in passing on the government’s unverified claims as facts, while “blocking out any other narrative,” as Danny Schechter wrote this week. That’s the great danger. It’s not simply that the dominant media see the world as the powerful see it; they don’t allow alternative and competing narratives to emerge that would enable us to measure the claims of the official view of reality.

The stars of the dominant media now tell us they did indeed ask tough questions of government during the run-up to the war. But you will go through the transcripts of that period before the war and you will find very few tough questions, and if you come across them, you will discover they are asked of the wrong people. That’s exactly what you could have heard last night on *Bill Moyers Journal* from John Walcott, Washington bureau chief for McClatchy (previously Knight Ridder), who took his own colleagues in the dominant media to task for relying on the very sources who cooked the intelligence books in the first place, or who had memorized the White House talking points, and who were prepared to answer every ‘tough’ question with wry evasions and smooth lies that were swallowed quickly by gullible questioners. Sadly, the Fourth Estate became the Fifth Column of democracy, colluding with the powers-that-be in a “culture of deception,” to quote Scott McClellan, that subverts the thing most necessary to freedom – the truth. Danny Schechter reminds us on Huffington Post that after the media’s “all the war, all the time” coverage of this contrived and manufactured war, Vice President Cheney dropped into a post-invasion media dinner to thank journalists for their service. And just the other day, this same Dick Cheney was tossed softball after softball at an event at the National Press Club where he drew laughter when he said “No, he wouldn’t be reading Scott McClellan’s book.”

The blind leading the blind.

What you don’t know can kill you, as well as other people’s children.

What do we need to know?

We need to know we're in trouble. Napoleon reportedly told his secretary to let him sleep during the night if the news from the front was good, but if the news was bad, he wanted to be awakened immediately so that he could act.

The new from the front is not good. As a journalist I report the assault on nature evidenced in coal mining that tears the tops off mountains and dumps them into rivers, sacrificing the health and lives of those in the valleys to short-term profit, and I see a link between that process and the stock-market frenzy which scorns long-term investments – genuine savings – in favor of quick turnovers and speculative bubbles whose inevitable bursting leaves insiders with stuffed pockets and millions of small stockholders, pensioners, employees and homeowners out of luck, out of work, and out of hope.

And then I see a connection between those disasters and the repeal of regulations designed to prevent exactly that kind of human and economic damage. Who pushed for the removal of that firewall? The political marionettes in Washington who dance to the speculators' tune, and who are well rewarded with campaign contributions and lucrative lobbying jobs when they have delivered the goods.

Even honorable opponents of the practice get trapped in the Web of a system that can effectively limits politics to those who can afford to spend millions of dollars in their race for office, and who know that their careers depend on pleasing their donors while deserting their voters.

Then I draw a line to the statistics that show real wages lagging behind prices, the compensation of corporate barons soaring to heights unequalled anywhere among other industrialized democracies, the greatest income inequality since the Roaring 20s, the relentless cheeseparating of federal funds devoted to public schools, to retraining workers whose jobs have been exported and to programs of health care, all of which snatch away the ladder by which Americans of scant means but willing hands and hearts could work and save their way up to middle-class security.

And I connect those numbers to campaigns by reactionaries against labor unions and higher minimum wages, and to their success in reframing the tax codes so as to strip them of their progressive character, laying the burdens of the social contract on a shrinking middle class awash in credit

card debt as workers struggle to keep up with rising costs for health care, for college tuitions, and for affordable housing – while huge inheritances go untouched, tax shelters abroad are legalized, the rich get richer and with each increase in their wealth are able to buy themselves more influence over those who make and execute the laws.

Edward R. Murrow told his generation of journalists: “No one can eliminate prejudices—just recognize them.” Here is my bias: Extremes of wealth and poverty cannot be reconciled with a truly just society. Capitalism will breed great inequality that is destructive unless tempered by an intuition for equality which is the heart of democracy. When the state becomes the guardian of power and privilege to the neglect of justice for the people who have neither power nor privilege, you can no longer claim to have a representative government.

Read historian Gordon Woods’ landmark book *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*. America discovered its greatness, he writes, “by creating a prosperous free society belonging to obscure people with their workaday concerns and their pecuniary pursuits of happiness – a democracy that changes the lives of hitherto neglected and despised masses of common laboring people.”

It’s going the other way now. But you will search the dominant media largely in vain for journalism that tells the truth about the fading of the American Dream. As conglomerates swallow up newspapers, magazines, publishing houses, and broadcast outlets, news organizations are folded into entertainment divisions. The “news hole” in the print media shrinks to make room for ads, celebrities, nonsense, and propaganda, and the news we need to know slips from sight.

It’s up to you to tell the truth about what’s happening to this country we love. It’s up to you to tell the truth about the struggle of ordinary people. It’s up to you to remind us that democracy only works when citizens claim it as their own. It’s up to you to write the story of America that leaves no one out.

And it’s up to you to rekindle the Patriot’s Dream.

Arlo Guthrie, remember:

*Living now here but for fortune
Placed by fate's mysterious schemes...
Who'd believe that we're the ones asked
To try to rekindle the patriot's dreams.*

*Arise sweet destiny, time runs short
All of your patience has heard their retort
Hear us now for alone we can't seem
To try to rekindle the patriot's dream.*

*Can you hear the words being whispered
All along the American stream
Tyrants freed the just are imprisoned
Try to rekindle the patriot's dreams.*

*Ah, but perhaps too much is being asked of too few
You and your children with nothing to do
Hear us now for alone we can't seem
To try to rekindle the patriot's dreams.*

Perhaps too much is being asked of too few – but you're not alone,
Remember? Look around. You're not alone.

And you know what we need to know.

Go, now, and tell it on the mountains and in the cities. From your
Web sites and laptops, tell it. From the street corners and the coffee house,
from delis and diners, tell it. From the workplace and the bookstore, tell it.
On campus and at the mall, tell it. Tell it at the synagogue, sanctuary, and
mosque. Tell it. Tell it where you can, when you can, and while you can.
Tell America what we need to know – and we just might rekindle the
patriot's dream.