

**State of the Media:**

Conference on Media Reform goes on as *Newsweek* self-flagellates in public.

By Matthew Murphy

The National Conference on Media Reform has gotten surprisingly little attention from the media itself. The *Post-Dispatch's* Michael Sorkin has done a good job, but there has been little national attention paid to a conference that was bursting at its seams with people. The national media may have been distracted by events that should prove to be an example of why a vigorous conversation about the future of media is important.

The hastily scheduled closing speech by Bill Moyers drew most of the attention the conference did receive. Moyers addressed the continuing attacks on PBS as a liberal institution. He singled out the current chairman of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), Ken Tomlinson, as the source of much of the criticism as well as an example of governments obsession with control. An obsession that extends even to an institution that was designed to insulate public broadcasting from such political interference, the CPB.

"The quality of democracy and the quality of journalism are deeply intertwined," said Moyers.

Tomlinson has said that PBS has a strong liberal bias and as a result has backed the creation of conservative programs such as Tucker Carlson: Unfiltered and the Wall Street Journals Journal Editorial Report, a program Tomlinson subsidized using CPB funds.

The attacks on PBS reminded Moyers of the Nixon administration. Nixon tried to reign in the aggressive investigative work PBS was doing in its early years. "I always knew Nixon would be back," said Moyers. "I just didnt know that he would ask to be chairman of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting."

Moyers praise for PBS and National Public Radio, both of which receive financing from CPB, drew some critical comments from some members of the audience. Some have criticized NPR saying its coverage was little better than that of the major media outlets. Yet on the whole, the audience enthusiastically responded to Moyers when he noted surveys and polls that showed the U.S. public puts greater faith in Public Broadcasting than in any other media outlet or any branch of government.

Moyers main theme echoed statements made in nearly every panel, caucus and workshop over the weekend; an independent media and media awareness is critical for the effective functioning of democracy. The night before, during the keynote event, Jim Hightower and other speakers struck a similar note. Hightower referred to the attendees as agitators, but that being agitator is a good thing in U.S. society and in U.S. history, despite current efforts to make it a pejorative term. "Its

the center post [of the washing machine] that gets the dirt out," said Hightower.

Some of the themes the conference was built upon - independence, vigilance and creativity - do not come out of a perceived sense of injustice, but reflect a growing perception that while individuals may be doing excellent work digging out stories that those in power want to hide, the media industry as a whole has lost its independence and its willingness to take on powerful interests. A series of events that unfolded as the conference was going on seemed to provide a real-life example of exactly why the Conference on Media Reform was put together.

A story in *Newsweek* that described an alleged desecration of a copy of the Koran at Guantanamo Bay hit newsstands just as tensions in Afghanistan boiled-over. Anti-American riots had broken out and several Afghans were killed. Under pressure, the anonymous source backed off his claims, but similar allegations by people willing to go on record had already been published. That did not prevent the White House and administration supporters from blaming the *Newsweek* for sparking the riots in Afghanistan. An *Associated Press* story on May 16th quoted administration officials attacking the *Newsweek* story. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said, "It's appalling that this story got out there." Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said, "People lost their lives. People are dead. People need to be very careful about what they say, just as they need to be careful about what they do."

Evidence that the story and the riots were no more than coincidental is not difficult to find. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Richard B. Myers, had discounted the impact of the story during a briefing on May 12th, a day before the White House first started laying the blame at *Newsweek's* feet. A *New York Times* story on May 17th quoted Myers' statement from the briefing, "[The senior commander in Afghanistan] thought it was not at all tied to the article in the magazine."

Though the *Newsweek* article was used in chants and on banners during the riots, the military dismissed it as a cause. Sharifa Shahab of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission was quoted in the *Times* on May 12th saying the incident, "was completely organized violence. It started with students from the medical college, and then armed men seized the occasion and abused it."

The administration's assertion that the article spurred the violence is thin. In the last year, several newspaper reports from such varied sources as *The Independent* of London and *The New York Post* have mentioned similar incidents of desecration but none have been accused of causing any incidents. Additionally, fighting in Afghanistan has been on the rise all spring, following the winter lull.

In response to pressure from the right and the administration, *Newsweek* has apologized for, and withdrawn the story. Not satisfied, with simply a retraction, the White House told NBC that more action was needed; though they did not specify. How much further *Newsweek* can go is also uncertain.

One tool the conference taught groups that work with the media was to never lose control of your message. The current administration is legendary for its message control. It has, in fact, turned a story about alleged abuses by U.S. soldiers at Guantanamo Bay into a story about *Newsweek* and its reporting. They have even managed to sidestep the issue of the anti-American violence in Afghanistan that they allege the article caused.

There has been little follow up on the fact that while *Newsweek* can no longer verify this particular incident, similar incidents have been reported in other publications numerous times. Instead of the media focusing on whether the guards are abusing the prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, or why there is such vehement anti-American activity in a country supposedly back on its way to stability, they have taken the easy route and are simply reporting on the story the administration has spun out. The major media outlets also seem to have failed to follow up on the fact that the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff said the incident was unrelated even before the White House seized upon the incident.

The statements by Rumsfeld, McClellan and others on the right who are piling on to criticize *Newsweek* as liberal propaganda are clear examples of the efforts to stifle an independent media. The pressure tactics are not new, nor are they even that severe, but in a time when media organizations increasingly act as, to quote Moyers, "stenographers repeating the spin of both sides," any reduction in the public's trust in the media damages the public's ability to make informed choices. The media also do it to themselves, repeating statements without investigating their merits. The resulting echo quickly covers the original story with navel-gazing and opportunities to get in shots at competitors.

The central pillar that the Conference on Media Reform sought to rebuild was one of public trust. The efforts do not begin and end with independent groups or progressive movements. Anyone who works in, works with or consumes the media needs to be aggressive in demanding that the media dig for the truth.

The public trust and U.S. democracy is preserved when the medias focus is on getting to the bone and not simply skimming the surface.