

How the White House and the media package government propaganda as entertainment

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Over the past two years an agency of the Clinton White House, the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), has secretly worked with all of the commercial television networks to broadcast anti-drug propaganda as part of the story lines of popular, prime time programs.

The networks agreed to weave the government's anti-drug message into TV scripts, in lieu of their legal obligation to broadcast, free of charge, government-sponsored public service ads against drug use. With the support of the White House and its so-called drug czar, General Barry McCaffrey, the networks were allowed to sell to private advertisers the air time that would otherwise have been devoted to anti-drug ads, reaping as a result tens of millions of dollars in additional revenues. At no time was the public informed that the programs it was viewing had been shaped and vetted by government officials.

This collusion between the media monopolies and the government for the purpose of manipulating public opinion only came to light when the Internet magazine *Salon* published an exposé on January 13. Since then all of the commercial networks—NBC, CBS, ABC, Fox, WB and UPN—have acknowledged their participation in the plan, as has the Clinton administration and the ONDCP.

Among the television shows that have aired episodes with government-approved anti-drug messages are such highly-rated series as NBC's "ER," CBS's "Chicago Hope," ABC's "Home Improvement" and Fox's "Beverly Hills 90210." Others include "The Practice," "General Hospital," "Sports Night," "7th Heaven," "The Wayan Brothers," "Promised Land," "Cosby," "Trinity," "Providence," "The Drew Carey Show," "Sabrina the Teenage Witch" and "Boy Meets World." In all, White House drug policy officials scrutinized in advance more than 100 episodes on all of the major networks.

The collaboration began after Congress in late 1997 approved a five-year, \$1 billion budget for the ONDCP to buy anti-drug advertisements. The law required the networks to provide one free ad for every ad paid for by the White House. The ads started running in the summer of 1998. However the networks soon began to complain about providing free air time, especially when the demand for TV ads shot up, fueled by the explosion of advertising by Internet companies.

The Clinton administration, always accommodating to the mercenary demands of big business, came up with the plan of inserting anti-drug messages into TV programs in order to pacify the networks. The ONDCP agreed to forego some of the ad time it had bought, and instead give the networks financial credits for airing entertainment programs with an approved message. This allowed the networks to resell the freed-up air time at the going commercial rate to corporate advertisers.

Alan Levitt, the drug-policy official running the campaign, told *Salon* the networks have thus far benefited from the scheme in the amount of nearly \$25 million. Bob Wiener, a spokesman for General McCaffrey, said the drug office will pay the networks nearly \$200 million to broadcast various anti-drug messages in commercials and during TV shows in the year that started last October 1.

The arrangement was known to only a few top media executives in Hollywood and New York. According to *Salon* almost none of the producers and writers who made the anti-drug episodes were aware of the deal between the networks and the White House drug office. But McCaffrey explained the arrangement at a hearing last October before an appropriations subcommittee of the House of Representatives. He outlined the complicated scale of financial credits allotted to the networks in return for TV episodes carrying an approved anti-drug message, in which the amount of air-time ceded back to the networks varied according to the length of the show and the time-slot it occupied.

One indication of how widespread the collusion between the networks and the ONDCP has become is the fact that the number of shows with anti-drug themes has risen from 32 as of last March to 109 this winter.

Spokesmen from all of the networks have denied any wrong-doing and insisted they in no way ceded "creative control" over scripts and programs to the government. White House spokesman Joe Lockhart said, "Gen. McCaffrey has been very innovative about getting anti-drug messages out and he is going to continue to do so." Clinton himself declared, "There was no attempt to regulate content or tell people what they had to put into it. Of course, I wouldn't support that."

But five of the networks have acknowledged that they sent either final drafts of scripts or tapes of completed shows to the advertising agency representing the drug office, and the smaller WB network, a subsidiary of Time Warner, conceded that it submitted scripts in progress from "Smart Guy" and "The Wayan Brothers."

The collaboration between the government and the networks in disseminating propaganda in the form of entertainment may not be limited to the issue of drug use. The January 17 edition of "NewsHour," the nightly news broadcast of the Public Broadcasting System, featured a segment on the White House-network anti-drug campaign. The PBS interviewer Terence Smith asked Dr. Donald Vereen, the deputy director of ONDCP, "Are there now messages in programming that had been agreed with the networks against tobacco or any other substances that we don't know about?"

Vereen answered, "Probably." To which an obviously nonplussed Smith replied, "Probably?" Vereen rejoined, "I'm sure there are."

In the wake of criticism from various media watchdog organizations and editorials in such newspapers as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* rebuking the networks and the White House, albeit mildly, ABC announced that it would no longer seek financial credits in return for airing programs approved by the drug czar's office. The network said it made the decision after the ONDCP began asking to see TV scripts before the shows were aired. And the ONDCP announced it would review its practice of giving the networks financial inducements for anti-drug messages in entertainment programs "to ensure that there is absolutely no suggestion or inference that the federal government is exercising any control whatsoever over the creative process." However the White House drug office did not say it would discontinue the program.

It is noteworthy that Time Warner's WB network has been the most emphatic in defending its collaboration with the ONDCP and the most dismissive of public criticism. When the story broke, Jamie Kellner, the chief executive of WB, said, "We submitted the scripts to get their input and make sure we were handling the stories in the most responsible way." He subsequently declared, "I'm amazed that this has been made into something that is important, when it is not.... This has nothing to do with the creative process. This is about accuracy, and it's offensive to challenge the motive."

Leaving aside Kellner's umbrage over his motives—which were patently mercenary—tailoring the content of programs to meet the demands of the government is by no means a new practice for Time Warner. In July of 1998 the Time Warner subsidiary CNN publicly retracted a program it had broadcast the previous month documenting, with eyewitness testimony, a US army commando raid during the Vietnam War known as Operation Tailwind, in which deadly sarin nerve gas was allegedly used to kill US defectors who had fled to Laos.

When the Pentagon, Vietnam-era commandos and such influential figures as former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell publicly and privately exerted pressure on CNN, the network quickly caved in. It commissioned a rigged inquiry to discredit the program, issued an abject apology and fired the documentary's two producers, April Oliver and Jack Smith.

The Tailwind episode is just one of several recent examples of media outlets suppressing investigative reports as a result of pressure from powerful corporations or government agencies. To name two: the *San Jose Mercury-News* withdrew an exposure of CIA ties to the crack cocaine traffic in south central Los Angeles and the *Cincinnati Enquirer* retracted a report on human rights violations by Chiquita Foods at its banana plantations in Central America.

Such episodes are only the most overt expressions of a process of media censorship and self-censorship that has become pervasive. For many years the mass media have with increasing openness served as instruments for promoting the basic foreign and domestic aims of the government and the corporate interests that dominate American politics. Above all the media have taken on the job of galvanizing public opinion behind US military interventions and vetting their coverage so as to exclude images of death and destruction. This reached its zenith in the massive and highly sophisticated campaign of propaganda and lies carried out to build support for the US-NATO war against Yugoslavia.

Any left-wing, or even liberal, critique of the social and political status quo has been virtually excluded from the air waves and the major print media. In what passes for news, as well as entertainment,

nothing that seriously challenges the pro-market, right-wing consensus of the most wealthy and powerful layers of society is permitted.

This process has been reinforced by the increasing monopolization of the mass media. The major television networks in the US are now owned by a handful of corporate conglomerates—Disney (ABC), General Electric (NBC), Viacom (CBS), Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation (Fox) and Time Warner (CNN and WB).

The marriage of the corporate-controlled media and the state is reflected as well in the personnel who occupy the uppermost ranks of reporters, news anchors and commentators. Millionaires and multimillionaires in their own right, they routinely hobnob with the so-called movers and shakers of the business and political world. The guest list at any major state function will include a significant number of TV news personalities and press commentators.

The monopolization of the mass media by a few corporate behemoths is inherently destructive of democracy. The direct collusion between the media giants and the government in packaging anti-drug propaganda as entertainment is the logical and organic outcome of the concentration of all means for disseminating information into fewer and fewer hands. It marks a new stage in the integration of the media into the capitalist state.

The claims of media spokesmen and government officials that the "creative process" was not infringed upon are largely besides the point. The fact is the networks and the federal government have been collaborating to manipulate the public by indoctrinating the viewing audience with messages vetted by the government, in the guise of entertainment and without the public's knowledge. If this is not a form of thought control, then the term has no meaning.

The exposure of this collusion underscores the enormous dangers raised by the new wave of mergers between media giants, telecommunications conglomerates and Internet providers, the most spectacular of which is America Online's buyout of Time Warner. The merged company will control not only a large portion of the content in news and entertainment available to the public—mass circulation magazines, broadcast and cable TV networks, film studios, record labels—but the avenues for circulating information—cable systems and the world's largest Internet provider.

In particular, this merger marks a major step in the efforts of big business and the state to rein in the Internet, the one medium that as of yet retains a significant element of free access and the open and democratic exchange of ideas. It is significant that the White House-media deal to secretly promote anti-drug propaganda was exposed by an Internet publication. This fact will not be lost on the media monopolies and the government. One can only assume it will intensify their determination to bring the Internet more firmly under their control.



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