

# Agitate

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Written and Edited:  
Michael Andoscia

## NOT SO CLEAR CHANNELS

I began research on this article when I heard that Clear Channel announced that it would not air any of the songs from Bruce Springsteen's latest CD, *Magic*. As a devotee of free speech I pounced on the opportunity to sling stones at this great media Goliath. It turns out that the only source I could find to confirm this story was a small article on the Fox News website.

Now I was stuck. I've always been a critic of Fox News. I'm especially wary of the information offered by this network when it seems to be the only source of information. This is especially true since the research demonstrates that those who rely on Fox News as their primary source of information are the least informed about the basic issues of the day. (Pew Research Center, Program on International Policy) I could not, in good conscience, use Fox News as a confirmatory source of information; yet it was the only source in this case. I decided to kill the Springsteen story.

But that didn't mean the story was dead. In fact, it demonstrated a deeper problem with mainstream media. With the wealth of information available throughout cyberspace and the electro-magnetic spectrum, why is it so hard to get information? So the story simply took a different turn. Maybe The Boss was being banned, maybe he wasn't. The larger issue was the decisions of corporations to air artistic or journalistic work.

I perused a passel of complaints against corporate media ranging from banning the Dixie Chicks, development of politically correct radio programming lists, killing stories and advertisements that are too controversial and the culture of avoiding risks in favor of more marketable cultural expressions. All of these items can be defined as mere marketing decisions; but they may also be defined as censorship. The worst kind of censorship—self censorship.

### Is Corporate Censorship Censorship?

Of significant concern to our founding fathers was that some monolithic government entity could deprive citizens of their rights to free speech and free expression. In many ways the American Revolution was as much a revolution of ideas as it was a revolution of arms. Great patriots like Thomas Paine, Benjamin Franklin and Samuel Adams took advantage of a free press to spread ideas that inspired a generation to rise up against traditional rule.

After the revolution Federalists and Anti-Federalists engaged in a war of words that ultimately lead to the manifestation of our Constitution and Bill of Rights. Letters to local newspapers were expansive and philosophically rich debates on the

responsibilities of government and the parameters of the rights of man. My local paper, the Fort Myers News Press has a two hundred word limit on letters to the editor. Could you imagine if Madison, Hamilton and Jay were restricted to just two hundred words? What if your thoughts are too complicated to express in two hundred words?

I was spinnin' 'round a dead dial  
just another lost number in a file  
dancin' down a dark hole  
just searchin' for a world  
with some soul.  
This is radio nowhere,  
Is there anybody alive out there?  
Lyrics by Bruce Springsteen  
Radio Nowhere  
Magic

The founders understood that the free flow of ideas was crucial to the existence of a free society. They passed laws and created traditions that were to protect this culture of thought and expression. Yes, the founders didn't always appreciate the direction of these ideas, as was demonstrated by President Adams' Sedition Acts. Nevertheless, we inherited the tradition of debate in the ongoing discussion on

the parameters of free speech. One thing the founders did not count on, however, was the rise of equally monolithic corporations that threaten the very rights protected from the government. That economic institutions could wield as much power as a government was outside the experience of the likes of Jefferson and Madison. But today, such institutions are many, and they are expanding and merging, creating greater institutions, accumulating more power and constituting a monstrous threat to liberty.

Clear Channel, for example, is one of the largest radio broadcasting companies in the world. Because of its size Clear Channel has a great deal to say about what music is heard and what music is not. Because song has historically been a locus of radical thought, the ability of this one company to control access to music is stifling to contemporary culture. Even if it is not the intent of Clear Channel to restrict radical expression from the airwaves, the decisions they make, based on market demand is equally oppressive.

The larger issue is yet to be answered definitively by society. Does the decision of a corporation to not air a song, print a work of literature, exhibit a work of art or screen a controversial movie or television show constitute censorship? After all, corporations are privately owned. Shouldn't individuals have the right to make marketing decisions based on whatever criterion they want? Pursuing one's economic self interest, the cornerstone of capitalism, cannot be considered censorship!

Such an argument can and has been made. In fact, legally, corporations are given the same rights as individuals. But corporations are not individuals. Extending rights to corpo-

rate entities equates wealth with freedom and puts liberty up for purchase. In such a scenario more money means more rights. And as corporations consolidate and merge resources, controlling more of the market than any individual can hope, the essential sale of liberties is potentially catastrophic for the state of our culture.

That an institution, be it of the government or the economy, can have so much power as to determine what individuals experience and know is a significant threat to liberty. If a government, as an institution, constitutes a potential threat to liberty, then the possible threat of a corporation cannot be ignored simply because it is owned by private individuals.

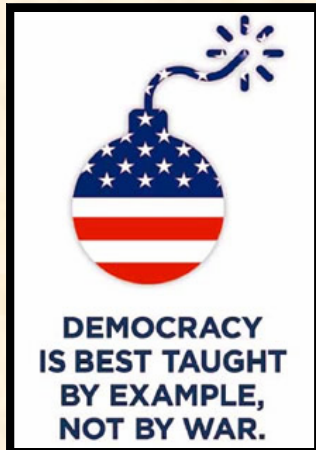
Bruce Springsteen is a very famous musician with incredible resources at his disposal. If The Boss wants his message to be heard, it will be heard. But what about musicians, artists and writers who are not so well known? Exactly how much expression are we the people being denied because of the power of corporations to exercise non-existent rights in the face of the very real rights of citizen's.

Corporations have a privileged status in our society. They are allowed to use resources that belong to the people, such as the electro-magnetic spectrum; they are allowed to use infrastructure paid for by the taxpayers, to make money. They can then use their money and influence against the very people from whom they derive their wealth. This is an unfair balance of power by any measure. To block our most creative minds from joining in on an exchange of free ideas is a travesty and a threat to our democratic society.

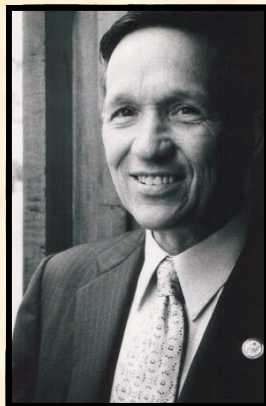
### Invisible Candidates

One example comes to mind, especially. During the 2004 presidential election I offered my students an incredible opportunity to get extra credit. They would get a day's worth of credit if they could find an article in the mainstream press that mentioned Dennis Kucinich. At the time, as is true today, Kucinich was doing nothing less than running for President of the United States. Yet none of my students were able to cash in on the extra credit.

So if the media only reports on select candidates at the expense of others, then who actually chooses the people we vote for? The media, by spotlighting some



The advertisement above was censored by Clear Channel in 2004. They would not allow it to occupy advertising space in Times Square



Try playing "Where's Dennis" with any mainstream media outlet.

politicians and blacking out others, has significant influence over our political process. And this influence is not exercised based on any community interest, but rather personal and economic interest.

How do the corporations make such decisions? Just take a look at who they support and the consequences of such support. In 1996 Congress passed the Telecommunications Act that expanded the ability of media corporations to accumulate even more power. Why would congress make such concessions to the media elite? Because they know what side of their bread is buttered...and who owns the knife. (opensecrets.org)

### Please don't offend...no offense!

It is also in the corporate best interest to avoid risk. Risks taken by corporations are calculated to maximize the potential for pay off. In other words...no risk at all. Corporate bean counters know that centrist, formulaic artistic constructs are safe. They appeal to the widest market. Radical and experimental music, literature and art are "too risky" to invest in. Better to stay with the tried and true formulas of success.

Corporations also fear losing market share. Things that might offend the larger audience means losing listeners, readers and viewers. In other words, they could lose valuable advertising revenue. It's better to advance the status quo.

The only contentious work corporate media is willing to invest in is the prurient and salacious. Sex sells...especially when the sex doesn't involve meaningful discourse on gender and sexuality. The listless submersion into the banal becomes the boundary of the debate on free speech. What is pornography? replaces What is the responsibility of corporate media to serve the public interest with regard to a diverse culture of ideas? But the public interest with regard to a diverse culture of ideas is...well...just not sexy enough.

### And the Culture Suffers

There is no difference between the repression of speech for political purposes and the repression of speech for economic purposes. So long as the mainstream, corporate media controls the dominant discourse in our society our literature, art and music will remain bland repetitions of the same old rhythms, meters, prose and images.

It is up to us. Yes, we are the consumers. We can choose the markets in which we shop. This could make a difference. But we are also the minds who create and speak and imagine a better world. We cannot be silent on this matter.

## Take Action!

Once again, awareness is key to being active. First, be aware of which corporations own your local media. Let them know what you want by organizing letter writing campaigns. Let them know that there is a market available to companies willing to take a risk. Next, learn and participate in independent media. Listen to music that is not on the top 40, pass around the music you like; make people aware. Check out Who Owns What on the Mad Sociologist Activism Page. Also check out the Independent Media Center, the Center for Citizen Media and the Center for Media and Democracy

