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Published in the October 1 - 7, 2004 issue of the [LA Weekly](#)

When Might Turns Right - Golly GE, Why Big Media is Pro-Bush

by Nikki Finke

ON ANY GIVEN DAY, the major TV networks rarely demonstrate good judgment, much less morality, when it comes to accepting a litany of nauseating advertisements. Hemorrhoid creams. Vaginal ointments. Erectile dysfunction. Army recruiting ads that portray war as a gee-whiz video game. KFC's claim that fried chicken is the new health food. And, lest we forget, Bud Light's farting horse during the Super Bowl.

But ads for the October 5 release of the new Fahrenheit 9/11 DVD?

Now that makes Big Media gag.

L.A. Weekly has learned that CBS, NBC and ABC all refused Fahrenheit 9/11 DVD advertising during any of the networks' news programming. Executives at Sony Pictures, the distributor of the movie for the home-entertainment market, were stunned. And even more shocked when the three networks explained why.

"They said explicitly they were reluctant because of the closeness of the release to the election. All three networks said no," one Sony insider explains. "It was certainly a judgment that Sony disagrees with and is in the process of protesting."

And protest Sony did. (Michael Lynton, the onetime Pearson publishing executive who is now chairman and CEO of Sony Pictures Entertainment, has privately told people he hasn't seen anything like this since his Penguin Group published Salman Rushdie's Satanic Verses.) What especially galled the Sony suits was this: The networks had no problem having the DVD ads appear on their entertainment shows so long as the guidelines for R-rated content like Fahrenheit 9/11 were followed. However, Sony executives told L.A. Weekly they wanted only to market the movie's DVD on CBS's, NBC's and ABC's news shows. "But all three networks said no to straight news," one Sony exec explained. "Then, suddenly, the networks were extending the definition of news programming to include the news magazines and the morning news shows and restricting access to those as well. That becomes very problematic to any advertiser trying to reach an adult audience."

Finally, this week, Sony's protests started having an effect. "We're now getting movement," a Sony suit told L.A. Weekly Monday night. Sony corporate senior vice president Susan Tick claimed Tuesday that the initial ban on the morning news shows was lifted, and time on an NBC Dateline had been made available. But she also confirmed that the early-evening news shows are still verboten, and ABC still remains adamant that the DVD can't be advertised on its PrimeTime Live. Meanwhile, the DVD ads' status on the other network news shows is murky at best. (Sony execs emphasize that Fox was not part of this cabal — apparently because no Fahrenheit 9/11 DVD ads were planned there.)

Just when we think Big Media's handling of this election can't get any worse, something like this comes along and we realize the situation is totally whack.

For all the hundreds of thousands of words broadcast and written about so-called Rathergate, the news of Sonygate hasn't received any attention at all. Yet here is more bile rising in our throats as Big Media does yet another favor for Dubya. At the very least the networks managed to delay Fahrenheit 9/11's DVD ads for several weeks by claiming they had to consult their attorneys to make sure the ads didn't fall under the Federal Election Commission rules governing electioneering communications — a bunch of laughable hooey, especially considering the armadas of attorneys already on network payrolls keeping the Election Commission at bay. And speaking of lawyers, how interesting that Big Media spent so much time spanking — or, worse, ignoring — Kitty Kelley's newly released *The Family* that dares to criticize the Bushies. When, by contrast, the networks fell all over themselves basically promoting the bejesus out of that swift-boat book of half-truths and full lies, *Unfit for Command*. As if, in some parallel universe, the lawyers for Kelley's publisher, Doubleday/Random House, are inferior to those of the Swifties' Regnery Publishing.

WHERE IS THE LEVEL playing field? Gone, thanks to the shenanigans of Big Media. Nor is it an exaggeration to state that the networks increasingly look like they're doing everything possible to help George W. win re-election. At least that wily old codger Sumner Redstone had the balls to come out this weekend and say what everyone already knows is true: "There has been comment upon my contribution to Democrats like Senator Kerry. Senator Kerry is a good man. I've known him for many years. But it happens that I vote for Viacom. Viacom is my life, and I do believe that a Republican administration is better for media companies than a Democratic one."

Like, duh! Who else but Dubya and his FCC frown posse, led by Michael Powell, is never going to meet one media merger after another they didn't like? And in return for all that conglomeration and consolidation, all Big Broadcasters have to do is fork over minor fines whenever they deflower the virgin ears and eyes of the public.

And with more money to spend on political ads this election year (hell, every election year), the Republicans are helping Big Media climb out of their recession-caused red ink. As Broadcasting & Cable reported this month, ad spending in markets across the country is "flat to down" this year. But thanks to all those GOP attack ads against Kerry and his own spots to defend against them, ad spending, especially in the battleground states, is "through the roof," up 14 percent to 15 percent.

Once upon a time, large corporations and their executives typically avoided any public discussion of their politics because partisan positions alienated customers and employees. But all of that changed after GE bought NBC in 1986. The NBC peacock was literally flipped from left to right. As the story goes, this was done so the bird was looking forward, not back. Yeah, right. Maybe we should applaud Viacom's Redstone for being aboveboard about his loyalties. So is News Corp.'s Murdoch. (Forget the little fact that Murdoch's No. 2, Peter Chernin, has endorsed Kerry, or that Redstone's co-president, Les Moonves, is an avowed Democrat. It's meaningless because Murdoch and Redstone are media owners, not renters.)

And Time Warner's chairman and CEO, Dick Parsons, doesn't need to articulate his politics since he's a Republican insider from way back. After Parsons nailed the top score on the New York state bar exam, he caught the eye of the late Nelson A. Rockefeller and even lived in Rockefeller's compound for a time, eventually becoming a trustee of the former vice president's estate after Rockefeller's death in 1979. Parsons also is a former law partner of Rudy Giuliani and even managed Giuliani's transition into the NYC Mayor's Office. Who better to have at Time Warner's helm than a GOP insider when the SEC is investigating your company?

Officially, GE (NBC's parent company) chairman and CEO Jeffrey Immelt has yet to publicly declare himself politically. But anyone who spends time with him knows which way he blows. "He's as right-wing as they come," an insider tells L.A. Weekly. "Just as bad as Bob Wright."

Wright, now GE's vice chairman but also NBC's long-term boss, never tried to hide his Republican partisanship because he never had to. For seemingly eons, his mentor and Immelt's predecessor, Jack Welch, was a rabid right-winger. Welch used to boast openly about helping turn former liberals Chris Matthews and Tim Russert into neocons. And Los Angeles Representative Henry Waxman is still waiting for GE to turn over those in-house tapes that would prove once and for all whether Welch in 2000 ordered his network and cable stations to reverse course and call the election for Bush instead of Gore that election night.

As for Immelt, he uses all the Republican buzzwords with obvious ease. Complain about GE's job outsourcing and he labels it "class warfare." And he declared to Fox News' business anchor, Neil Cavuto, that he wished his own network's MSNBC talk TV could be "as interesting and edgy as you guys are. I think the standard right now is Fox." MSNBC and increasingly CNBC as well are Fox News clones.

In return, Immelt is beginning to bag Republican perks, like appointment to President Bush's Commission on Social Security. Besides all those lucrative U.S. defense contracts, his GE has snagged \$450 million of orders in Iraq alone in 2003, and an apparent \$3 billion more over the next few years. Plus, more than half of Iraq's power grid is GE technology. Even before the fighting there started, Immelt told CNBC it was a GE business opportunity. "We built about a billion-dollar security business that's going to be growing by 20 percent a year, so we've been able to play into that."

Nor does it hurt that GE recently installed Anna Perez, a former Bush adviser to W and Condi who also served as press secretary to former first lady Barbara Bush, as NBC Universal's executive vice president of communications.

Then there's Disney's Michael Eisner. As the longtime chairman and CEO, Eisner was never in the league of MCA/Universal's Lew Wasserman, inarguably the most active Democratic activist of the media-mogul crowd. In contrast to Wasserman's huge effort to get Hollywood-wide support for Jimmy Carter back in 1976, Eisner, while a Democrat, made just a small personal effort on behalf of the primary campaigns for his buddies Bob Kerry and Bill Bradley.

But that was then and this is now. Disney has turned most of ABC's extensive radio network and owned-and-operated stations into a 24/7 orgy of right-wing talk. Disney's chief lobbyist, Preston Padden, is not only one of Washington, D.C.'s most infamous Republican lobbyists, but he used to work for Rupert Murdoch. And Padden was set to use all of his considerable influence in Congress and the White House on Disney's behalf if that big bad Goliath, Comcast, really tried to gobble up the Mouse House. As a result, no one thought it just coincidental when W pleaded just days after 9/11 for Americans "to return to the kind of lives we were leading before [that], especially air travel. Get on board. Do your business around the country. Fly and enjoy America's great destination spots. Go down to Disney World in Florida; take your families and enjoy life the way we want it to be enjoyed." It was as close to a White House commercial for Disney as any corporation could dare hope.

Then Bush followed that up weeks later with a PR visit to Orlando, Florida, where the Magic Kingdom had suffered a 25 percent drop in ticket sales, where a national photo showed the theme park's deserted entrance. And since then, in addition to the usual tax breaks from W's brother, Jeb, Disney World has benefited from special security measures, including extra protection and a federally declared "no flyover zone."

Given all of the above, when Eisner was replaced as chairman by former Democratic Senator George Mitchell, nobody seemed perturbed, not even when Mitchell sounded off in Kerry's corner during the Boston convention this summer. And why should they since Mitchell is at best a short-timer? And let's not forget that Eisner had already given the Bushies the biggest gift of all: pulling the distribution plug on Fahrenheit 9/11 even though stockholders were starving for movie-division profits after everything else on Disney's slate in the first half of 2004 fell flat.

Apparently, Eisner didn't care that this beleaguered company would miss out on one of the most lucrative films all year. But it certainly made Disney watchers sick to their stomachs. Perhaps Big Media's advertisers have a cream or ointment or pill to cure that. Not to worry: We hear Moore's next movie is Sicko, about the health-care industry.

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