

Activist says corporations dominate media



By Larry O'Connor
staff writer

The news from Jeff Cohen is that we're not getting all of it.

The executive director and founder of Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting said during a Wednesday lecture at the Livonia Town Hall that a lot of news is not being written about or seen in the media.

Corporate domination of the media, stories "missed" by the press and news outlets that blindly swallow the government line were just some of the subjects discussed by Cohen. The Town Hall audience, at Roma's of Livonia, listened intently.

In a way, Cohen's appearance at the Town Hall meeting rings with a bit of irony. This is the same Jeff Cohen who in 1969 led a student protest at North Farmington High School to repeal the dress code.

The rebel had returned, neatly attired in a blue sports coat and tie, espousing views that have not changed much from the late 1960s, during the height of the protest movement.

"It's important to discuss the media in the United States," said Cohen, a 1969 graduate of North Farmington. "We're probably the most media-dominated culture in the history of the world."

When 98 percent of the households in the U.S. have television sets, when two-thirds of the population gets its news from TV, when more than half of U.S. citizens can identify Judge Wapner from "The People's Court" and less than 10 percent can identify the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Cohen has a point.

So, General Electric's ownership of NBC, the merging of Time and Warner and Gannett's ownership of 90 daily newspapers, 40 weekly newspapers and 28 broadcast outlets should be a concern — or at least pose a question: Who really shapes the news we read and hear?

Cohen believes he knows the answer.

His prime example is GE's ownership of one of the country's largest TV networks. Cohen said GE is one of the leading weapon producers, makes profits from "Star Wars" technology and doesn't have a stunning environmental record.

GE is also Tom Brokaw's boss.

A major conflict of interest exists there, in his opinion. Those who own the media have a say in what's reported.

COHEN ESTIMATES 25 corporations dominate the media in this country. If present trend continues, he added, the number could dwindle to half a dozen.

Too much power concentrated in too few hands is a

threat to liberty was a basic tenant of conservative thought, Cohen said. Today's conservatives have not been critical of the current trend, mainly, he said, because corporations that own TV stations and newspapers tend to be conservative.

"They believe if corporations continually gobble up most of the media," Cohen said, "it will help conservatives dominate the media and drown out other points of view, especially those points of view that don't have big money behind them."

"To us at FAIR, GE owning NBC is not the scariest thing," Cohen added. "What's scarier is GE was allowed to take over one of the largest networks and it wasn't even debated in the media."

Missed stories are numerous. He cites the savings and loan crisis, the impact of the budget deficit and the actual number of civilians killed during the Panama invasion as examples.

But U.S. involvement in the Persian Gulf is where the media has been particularly remiss, in his opinion. The press should have questioned the military's objective from the start of the crisis, he said.

Instead, Cohen said, the media was too busy praising President George Bush in a jingoist fashion about how swiftly he acted.

"NOW IT'S too late," he said. "The question we should have been asking from the start is, 'Are we willing to risk tens of thousands of American lives, in addition to innocent Arabs lives, in order to protect the border of Kuwait?'"

News shows such as ABC-TV's "Nightline" and PBS-TV's "MacNeil-Lehrer Report" have not set a good example. Part of the problem is the experts interviewed on these shows.

Cohen points to a study conducted by FAIR on "Nightline." The group studied 865 programs with 2,496 guests.

The report released in February 1989 concluded guests on the show hosted by Ted Koppel tend to be white and male and members of the conservative government, or military and corporate elites.

Some of the most frequent guests included Henry Kissinger and Alexander Haig (14 appearances as of February 1989). Kissinger and Haig have also been on "Nightline" during the Persian Gulf crisis.

Cohen said minorities, who make up a good portion of the soldiers being sent to the Persian Gulf, or people like Ron Kovic, on whose story "Born on the Fourth of July" is based, would offer differing opinions.

Kovic was recently on "Nightline" debating U.S. involvement in the Persian Gulf with General William Westmoreland.

"He (Kovic) did get on," Cohen said, "but he was treated rudely in a way Henry Kissinger never would have been treated."

COHEN IS also critical of the print media. He labels the New York Times and the Washington Post "propagandists" for the government, and said unnamed sources often supply a good deal of the news to those papers.

Daily papers, privately owned and removed from the Washington scene, do a better job of reporting on the Persian Gulf crisis, he said.

FAIR was founded in 1986 to examine media bias, especially a perceived right wing one. The public interest group is based in New York and counts on membership dues and charitable foundations for money. Jackson Browne, Daryl Hannah, Casey Kasem, Studs Terkel and Little Steven Van Zandt are on FAIR's Advisory Board.

Cohen has a law degree and is an inactive member of California Bar. He has written several investigative articles for magazines, including Rolling Stone, Mother Jones and The Nation.

Before starting FAIR in 1986, Cohen had been involved in a number of consumer activist groups. He worked with CAUSE in Los Angeles, a group fighting utility rate increases. Alliance for Survival, an anti-nuclear organization, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, a civil rights group.

Often, Cohen worked in media relations with those organizations, which steered him toward starting FAIR.

Cohen's activism, though, can be traced back to his days at North Farmington High School. There, he led a student protest to repeal the dress code. He was also involved in the school's underground newspaper, Conscientious Objector.

A PICTURE in a newspaper shows Cohen holding a picket sign saying, "Let My People Grow (Hair)."

"I tried to grow a beard," said Cohen, who was No. 1 singles player on the school tennis team. "You could hardly see it. It was just a few whiskers. They (school administration) asked me to go home and shave it off and when I didn't they suspended me."

The protest proved fruitful. Next year, the dress code was revised to allow longer hair for boys and slacks for girls. By then, Cohen had graduated.

One of the women in the Town Hall audience was the wife of the one the assistant principals at the time.

"In 1969 I was an outsider, a protester," Cohen said. "We've been able to bridge that generational gap . . . I don't have to protest anymore to be heard."

Ground broken on senior development

By Susan Buck
staff writer

Ground-breaking ceremonies for the Freedom Square senior housing development on Freedom Road, east of Drake Road, were held recently on land donated by Ronald and Catherine Hanaway, former Farmington Hills residents.

The Hanaways donated 10 acres of land to the city in 1984 with the stipulation that the land be used exclusively for elderly housing.

"It's a win-win situation," said Steve Brock, assistant to the Farmington Hills city manager. "We're working

cooperatively to see that the project becomes successful."

Construction of the 112-unit project is expected to begin Dec. 1, with completion one year later, according to Paul Hendrickson, vice-chairman/developer, FCA Senior Citizens' Housing Corporation.

With financing from the Michigan State Housing Development Authority, will build and operate the 9½-acre site. That means 22 (20 percent) of the 112 units will be subsidized.

Some \$246,000 paid by FCA Senior Citizens Housing Corporation to the city for the land, will be used for senior citizens programs, Brock said.

"It's a goodly sum," Brock said. "It will be used for the continuation and enhancement of the senior programs."

Loretta Conway, director of the Farmington Hills senior programs, could not be reached for comment.

RANCH-STYLE units in the Freedom Square complex should become available as early as late next summer, Hendrickson said.

Sixty-six apartments will be in one-story, cluster-type buildings, similar to the nearby Tapiola Village community in Farmington Hills and sponsored by the FCA Housing Corporation.

The remaining 46 apartment units will be located in a two-story building, which will feature the multi-purpose room and on-site convenience store.

Freedom Square is designed for senior citizen residents desiring an independent lifestyle.

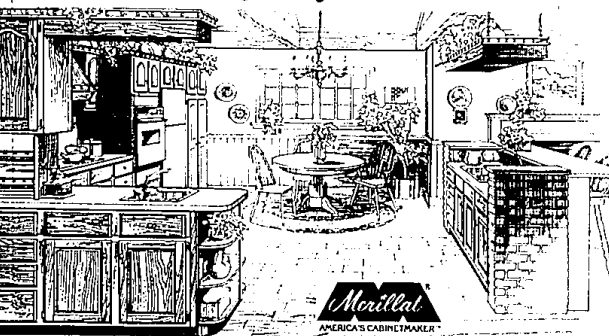
The project architect is Siegal/Tuomala Associates of Farmington Hills. Fairview Construction, Inc. of Auburn Hills is the general contractor.

Freedom Square will be Fairview's fourth senior citizen project.

The complex will be managed by Piper Realty Company of Flint. Piper Realty also manages the Tapiola Village Community, which has a long waiting list.

No list has been developed yet for Freedom Square. Subsidized apartments rent for \$317 for a one-bedroom apartment and \$361 for a 2-bedroom apartment, Hendrickson said.

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