

The media and our failing democracy

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by Steven Higgs

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Photograph courtesy of The Nation

Katrina vanden Heuvel, editor of *The Nation* magazine, will be in Bloomington on Sept. 6 and 7. Among the events she will participate in will be a panel discussion on "What's Right and Wrong with the Media" at the IU School of Journalism.

Katrina vanden Heuvel uses terms like "fragile," "frayed" and "in danger of losing" when discussing the state of American democracy.

"Kids know everything about Britney Spears, but they can't name one Supreme Court Justice," *The Nation* editor said during a recent phone interview. "That is a measure of a dangerous moment."

And vanden Heuvel minces no words when asked about the media's role in the nation's democratic decline. They have abdicated their responsibilities, she said.

For example, the "crisis in newspapers" isn't that people aren't reading anymore, she said. It's that the corporate media have allowed the bottom line and shareholders' financial interests to outweigh their responsibilities to readers and our democracy.

"They blame the people," she said. "They say people don't want this kind of news. But there is a leadership role the media should play in a democracy, which isn't just asking tough questions but is reporting on and covering what is essential for people to know."

"Even though newspapers are still making money, the demands for more and more profits because of Wall Street, and not the demands from Main Street, have won out," she said. "And that is to the detriment of people who want to be active citizens."

Vanden Heuvel's comments in mid-August foreshadowed the message she will bring to Bloomington on Sept. 6 and 7. She will participate in a panel discussion on "What's Right and Wrong with the Media?" at the IU School of Journalism on Sept. 6.

Also participating in the discussion, moderated by journalism professor Mike Conway, will be Stephen F. Cohen, a scholar of Russia and contributing editor at *The Nation*, and Julia Fox, an IU telecommunications professor.

Vanden Heuvel and Cohen, her husband and an IU graduate, will participate in another panel discussion titled "Russia Today." ***She will also address the Democratic Women's Caucus breakfast***, be



interviewed on WFHB Community Radio, conduct a workshop with the editorial staff at the Indiana Daily Student and attend a reception downtown.

The nation's only female political magazine editor, vanden Heuvel particularly decries the trend toward "infotainment" in the news business. The *Los Angeles Times*, she noted, has cut back its labor reporting and added a "celebrity beat reporter."

"We said 12 years ago that we were in danger of seeing the line between news and entertainment blurred," she said. "And I would say that line has now been blurred and obliterated, to the detriment of a strong democracy."

Brittany Spears, she reminded.

Media concentration, of course, is a factor in these "cutbacks in real reporting," she said.

"The news operations for which some of these journalists work are big multinational corporations that have business in Washington," she said. "They have business before the FCC. They have tax breaks they want."

And it's not just the News Corps. and Gannetts that are undermining the fundamental principles of our free press and democracy.

"The other thing we are seeing that is real distressing is the concentration at the alternative weekly level," she said.

The Phoenix-based New Times Media purchased the New York-based Village Voice Media in 2005 and now owns the *Village Voice* and weekly papers in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, Denver, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Nashville, St. Louis, Kansas City, Miami, Houston and Phoenix.

"We did a cover story five or six years ago about what was happening with alternative weeklies," she said, "You lose that localism, and, by the way, there's less interest in investigative reporting.

"Years ago the *Village Voice* would do the worst 10 landlords, which had some real link to corporate power in New York. A lot of that has been ended by absentee owners who are less interested in that than in more advertising, more classifieds."

Vanden Heuvel is not fatalistic about the media's or the nation's futures, by any means. While she believes "people are going to want print in their hands for a long time to come," she calls the Internet a "democratizing force."

"Net roots" activism, with a journalistic component, "is opening up what was once a closed sphere to citizens," she said.

Bloggers have generated passion and ideas and pushed politics in a more progressive direction, she said.

The Web site Daily Kos has a grouping of citizens from around the country who "really drive debate around an issue."

And Josh Marshall's Talking Points Memo blog "was instrumental in bringing attention to what we now know as Attorneygate."

But a lot of the net-roots movement operates in a "war-room role," vanden Heuvel said, citing antiwar Connecticut senatorial candidate Ned Lamont's 2006 Democratic Primary victory over Sen. Joseph Lieberman as an example.

"But as a form of journalism, at this stage, it has not replaced the really strong news reporting that we've seen in newspapers and magazines," she said, reiterating the crucial role journalism plays in a functioning democracy.

She expects that will change.

"You will begin to see well-funded Internet sites, which put a premium on bringing together some of the reporting that was once in newspapers," she said. "And that will be something to watch."

Steven Higgs can be reached at editor@BloomingtonAlternative.com.