

# MAKING OUR

*Consciousness and the Media*

THE NEWS REPORT COMPELLED HER TO ACT: A FIVE-YEAR-OLD BOY GOT HOLD OF A GUN



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# VOICES COUNT

PROFILE OF MEDIA ACTIVIST KIM WEICHEL

GAIL BERNICE HOLLAND

AND FIRED. HIS PARENTS DIDN'T REALIZE HE HAD LEARNED HOW TO HANDLE FIREARMS JUST FROM WATCHING TV. SO, WHEN JOURNALIST AND MEDIA ACTIVIST KIM WEICHEL READ THIS STORY, SHE KNEW SOMETHING HAD TO CHANGE.

"Fortunately," Weichel recalls, "the young boy didn't kill anyone, but that article had an impact on me because my own son, who was six at the time, was so close to this boy's age."

As a freelance radio and TV producer, Weichel knows how the media can shape our thoughts and values, and like so many people she is disturbed by the daily dose of media stories describing violent acts in our society. She has spent her career trying to produce positive, inspiring stories on radio and cable TV, and is the United Nations and Global Affairs Correspondent for the TV show *Positive Spin*. Yet, as a parent, her main concern is how children's minds are molded by what they see and hear on television.

"I began to question whether we, as citizens, could help create the kind of media that we'd like for our children and for our society."

In 1999, Weichel decided to get together with other individuals who had the same concerns, and after several meetings in her home they launched a media reform campaign. Weichel and her partners founded a nonprofit organization, now called "Our Media Voice: Campaign for Accountability." Helen Grieco, executive director of the California National Organization for Women, and Duane Elgin, an author who has been concerned about media accountability for many years (see his article on pp. 10-15), are both active in this campaign.

Although their media accountability campaign is interested in all forms of media, Weichel says, their main focus has been broadcast television because of the vast influence TV has around the world. Elgin writes, "Television may be the mirror in which we see ourselves as a society, but the reflection it gives is often distorted and unbalanced. Our evolutionary intelligence is being tested by how well we use this powerful vehicle to communicate collectively about our future."

Weichel acknowledges that the broadcast industry needs to continue informing the public about the world's problems, but she is critical of the media for not focusing equal attention on possible solutions. These are rarely discussed or promoted. "I think there is a deep hunger for 'good news'. PBS has some great shows, and Bill Moyers does a wonderful job presenting different issues, but that's not nearly sufficient. We're calling for better balance." ➤

## INSPIRING PROGRAMS

From a personal perspective, Weichel would like to see innovative and inspiring programs that explore human consciousness, the body-mind-spirit connection, and personal and societal transformational ideas. Together with her partners in Our Media Voice they make the case that there should be less stereotyping, less violence, and more coverage of critical issues such as economic and environmental problems. And to fully understand complex issues, the public requires diverse perspectives.

“Many studies indicate that people are depressed after watching the evening news,” Weichel points out. “The mass media are the central nervous system of our society, and they’re affecting our collective psyche. Unfortunately, there is an assumption that violence-oriented programming is what people want to see and hear. In my opinion, we are becoming increasingly numb to the amount of violence in our films and TV. It’s like eating too much salt; the more we have, the more the body seems to crave the salt. It’s a philosophy of what sells as opposed to what is healthy for viewers.”

Perhaps, says Weichel, if producers stepped into the shoes of parents, they would expand their own consciousness from the limited view of “Is this going to sell?” to asking the more socially responsible question, “Is this a program I want parents of children or children themselves to watch?”

“The rating system monitors only those actually watching at the time, not those who have chosen not to watch,” says Weichel. “Many people tell me that they have chosen to turn off their TVs, but that is a passive response. We need something much more active.”

Weichel is not a newcomer to social-change activism. For many years, she was involved in citizen diplomacy, worked with the Center for Citizen Initiatives, which managed training programs for Russian entrepreneurs, and is presently executive director of Pathways to Peace, a global peace-building organization.

## BUILDING CITIZEN POWER

“I have seen the power of citizen diplomacy,” she says. “For instance, I saw citizens make a huge difference in the ending of the Cold War. I am convinced that each of us can make a difference, especially when

## MEDIA ACTION RESOURCE GUIDE

<a href="http://WWW.ADBUSTERS.ORG">WWW.ADBUSTERS.ORG</a>	<i>AdBusters</i>
<a href="http://WWW.AWRT.ORG">WWW.AWRT.ORG</a>	<i>American Women in Radio and Television</i>
<a href="http://WWW.DEMOCRATICMEDIA.ORG">WWW.DEMOCRATICMEDIA.ORG</a>	<i>Center for Digital Democracy</i>
<a href="http://WWW.MEDIALIT.ORG">WWW.MEDIALIT.ORG</a>	<i>Center for Media Literacy</i>
<a href="http://WWW.PUBLICINTEGRITY.ORG">WWW.PUBLICINTEGRITY.ORG</a>	<i>Center for Public Integrity</i>
<a href="http://WWW.FAIR.ORG">WWW.FAIR.ORG</a>	<i>Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting</i>
<a href="http://WWW.IWMF.ORG">WWW.IWMF.ORG</a>	<i>International Women’s Media Foundation</i>
<a href="http://WWW.JUSTTHINK.ORG">WWW.JUSTTHINK.ORG</a>	<i>Just Think Foundation</i>
<a href="http://WWW.CORPORATIONS.ORG/MEDIA">WWW.CORPORATIONS.ORG/MEDIA</a>	<i>Media Reform Information Center</i>
<a href="http://WWW.MEDIASCOPE.ORG">WWW.MEDIASCOPE.ORG</a>	<i>Mediascope</i>
<a href="http://WWW.MEDIATANK.ORG">WWW.MEDIATANK.ORG</a>	<i>Media Tank</i>
<a href="http://WWW.MEDIATRANSPARENCY.ORG">WWW.MEDIATRANSPARENCY.ORG</a>	<i>Media Transparency</i>
<a href="http://WWW.MEDIAWATCH.COM">WWW.MEDIAWATCH.COM</a>	<i>Media Watch</i>
<a href="http://WWW.MEDIAFAMILY.ORG">WWW.MEDIAFAMILY.ORG</a>	<i>National Institute on Media and the Family</i>
<a href="http://WWW.PCCHARTER.NET">WWW.PCCHARTER.NET</a>	<i>People’s Communication Charter</i>
<a href="http://WWW.RECLAIMTHEMEDIA.ORG">WWW.RECLAIMTHEMEDIA.ORG</a>	<i>Reclaim the Media</i>
<a href="http://WWW.WEBGRRLS.ORG">WWW.WEBGRRLS.ORG</a>	<i>Webgrlrs International</i>
<a href="http://WWW.WIF.ORG">WWW.WIF.ORG</a>	<i>Women in Film</i>
<a href="http://WWW.WIFP.ORG">WWW.WIFP.ORG</a>	<i>Women’s Institute for Freedom of the Press</i>

## MEDIA OUTLETS

<a href="http://WWW.ALTERNET.ORG">WWW.ALTERNET.ORG</a>	<i>AlterNet</i>
<a href="http://WWW.FREESPEECH.ORG">WWW.FREESPEECH.ORG</a>	<i>Free Speech TV</i>
<a href="http://WWW.NEWSWECANUSE.COM">WWW.NEWSWECANUSE.COM</a>	<i>News We Can Use</i>
<a href="http://WWW.PROMETHEUSRADIO.ORG">WWW.PROMETHEUSRADIO.ORG</a>	<i>Prometheus Radio Project</i>
<a href="http://WWW.MEDIACHANNEL.ORG">WWW.MEDIACHANNEL.ORG</a>	<i>MediaChannel</i>
<a href="http://WWW.WORLDLINKTV.ORG">WWW.WORLDLINKTV.ORG</a>	<i>Link TV</i>



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many of us get together and speak out. I believe in Margaret Mead's saying that 'when the citizen's lead, the leaders will eventually follow'."

Weichel knows that change is a cumulative and slow process that entails many steps, plus the ability and fortitude to overcome

demanding obstacles. For example, when she contacted individual journalists, they admitted they would like to cover more positive, consciousness-raising stories, but they maintain that the media management isn't yet ready to make major changes.

Is the public ready? One of the first tasks Our Media Voice has taken on is to educate citizens about their media rights, by explaining to the public that their voice really counts. Hence "Our" in the name of their organization. Many people don't understand that the airwaves in the United States are legally owned by the public, and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has the responsibility to make sure the airwaves are used by broadcasters in the public interest.

Even so, within the last few years fewer and fewer corporations are controlling a larger and larger percentage of the airwaves. "A handful of corporations now drive public opinion and public policy," she points out.

On its website, Our Media Voice states: "Given dramatic developments in media conglomeration and the absence of tools for discerning the public interest, we realized that more effective ways of giving citizen feedback were vital. A key question became: How do we bring in the voice of the public to balance the power of media conglomerates and ensure that the vital interests of the public are truly served?"

Our Media Voice works closely with the Action Coalition for Media Education (ACME), a national network, and Weichel serves on the leadership council for the ACME San Francisco Bay Area branch. Throughout the United States, many other individuals and groups are also trying to influence what we see, read, and hear through the media (See the Media Action Resource Guide on page 40.) The public awareness of the media's role in affecting our consciousness, and even democracy itself, has

'When we have a deeper awareness of our media rights, more of us focus on how to use the media in a healthier way.'—KIM WEICHEL

increased dramatically because of the efforts of these organizations.

## TAKING ACTION

In 2003, along with more than 1,600 people, Weichel attended the National Conference on Media Reform, in Madison, Wisconsin. She has been invited to speak at other conferences, workshops, and universities. "I talk about this topic everywhere I go, whether it's an informal conversation with friends, or a public forum. I know from the talks I have given, people have been more energized. They tell me they are going to write a letter to a broadcast station, or sign a petition."

On the other hand, Weichel realizes that not everyone is willing to write letters or take action, but she also believes it is just as important to ignite "inner" action, to tap into the power of inner wisdom. "When we, in our collective consciousness, have a deeper awareness of what our media rights are as citizens, and more and more of us focus on how to use the media in a healthier way, then we could see a spontaneous leap of consciousness when a 'critical mass' is reached."

Weichel believes that individuals can make a difference in our society, especially when people work together to achieve a common goal. "It is an empowering feeling. By standing tall for something we really believe in, I feel we can ultimately—collectively—help improve our world."



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