

The National Conference for Media Reform **Conference Notes**

Thank you to the organizers and funders of the National Conference for Media Reform. If for no other reason, the conference is important for the role that it plays as a 12-step meeting for media reformers. That is, it allows those working in the field of media activism, media reform and media scholarship to know that they are not alone in their struggle. It is an opportunity to get renewed, revitalized and re-inspired, and the opening sessions with Bill Moyers and Rev. Jackson were invaluable for just that.

Holding the conference in Memphis on Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend was also part of that inspiration. Dr. King's spirit was in evidence throughout the event, and his name was rightfully and powerfully evoked in speeches and presentations throughout the four-day conference. I believe, however, that Dr. King would have been less than pleased with where we are in terms of media diversity, and more importantly for this event, diversity in media reform.

WHAT DIVERSITY?

The second night of the conference, I went to see a screening of "Outfoxed," the documentary about Fox Newschannel directed by Robert Greenwald. Throughout the film I saw the same faces that I saw walking around the conference – Bob McChesney, John Nichols, Jeff Cohen, etc. And I saw them as commentators again and again and again throughout the documentary. At the very end of the film, there was a montage of women and people of color commenting on the ills of Fox. It was as if someone had seen an earlier roughcut of the film and said, "Bob, you need someone other than white men on the screen." When the film was over, I told Mr. Greenwald that content-wise, I thought the film was very good. However, there are women and people of color – walking around this very convention hall – who are very able commentators on the media, and it would have been nice to see them. This is in no way meant to denigrate the work of Bob or John or Jeff or Jeff Chester or any others. It would just be nice to see some other, and more diversified, faces. Mr. Greenwald simply replied, "I agree."

I tell this story because it was a running theme for me through much of the conference. Where are the women and people of color in the media reform movement? Why do we see the same white male faces at the podium in our own movement? Yes, women were in evidence, but as is often the case they were ghettoized on panels about children and the media, or the creeping influence of advertising. I, a white woman, was on a panel with four black men. It should not, however, take a panel about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to get that level of diversity in a session. Who are we to criticize the media if we don't look in our own mirror and assess what we present to the world, and what we obviously are perpetuating within ourselves? How can we accuse the establishment if we can't fix the problem in our own house? As someone on my panel astutely noted, as eloquent as Bill Moyers was, he did not mention one person of color or a single woman – with the

exception of Amy Goodman with a thinly veiled sexual overtone – in his discussions about media reform.

THE PRE-CONFERENCE – BRINGIN TOGETHER ACADEMICS AND ACTIVISTS

The pre-conference was an opportunity for academics to present their work in a more relaxed environment than the typical conference where one is under the lens of scrutiny by one's peers. The day was a forum wherein the latest research affecting media reform could be shared beyond the walls of the ivory tower as well as debated with one's colleagues. In that, it was a useful exercise.

However, while there was discussion of how to move this research along so as to be useful to activists, I was disappointed that there didn't seem to be a sense of resolution to the problem. It is a significant topic that should not be ignored. I, like many academics, have waited 6 months or more (one person told me 2 years!) to have their work published in an academic journal. The unfortunate reality is that completed, substantial, effective work could be available for dissemination well before being vetted by a scholarly journal. How do we facilitate the process of getting research to activists who might need it? How do we marry activists to academics who may be doing work that will assist one another? This was a question that never got resolved.

Second, how do we – academics and activists alike – become better at using the media to *our* advantage? I sat in on one of the sessions about taking research public. It was extremely rudimentary for the group of people that they were talking to. It would have been far more useful for someone like Gene Kimmelman to give case studies about how he has worked the press or Gigi Sohn explaining how she battles the media. A lesson in public relations 101 was not useful to a room filled with, what I think, were primarily media scholars.

One suggestion I had was to create a clearing house for reporters on topics of media reform. There are a number of such lists that exist to assist reporters. There are generic lists, like Profnet, as well as lists that are designated for specific reporter beats. The lists vet the experts for the reporters. If we make it easier for reporters to write about media reform issues, we increase the likelihood that they will. This would be a simple thing that the movement could do to facilitate exposure and get more names and faces into the media beyond the usual suspects.

THE SCOPE OF MEDIA REFORM

A continuing refrain I heard was a frustration with the limited scope of the definition of media reform. Media ownership was, and remains, the spotlighted topic of the event. Of course media consolidation and media ownership are fundamental to the media reform conversation. However, I would have thought that the movement had expanded beyond this in two years. Perhaps this is my own naiveté. (Beyond my own personal contention – and perhaps bias – that it is the economic structure of the industry that drives the media

content, this overemphasis on the single issue of media ownership seems ineffectual to me. Again, this may be a personal bias.)

That being said, what might be areas to focus on? (These are some thoughts based on my own interests and concerns. I'm sure media activists or media practitioners would make up a different list.)

- Net neutrality – I realize this is tied into media ownership. However, in one session, Mark Cooper rightly brought to the fore that the net neutrality issue is not won (which was widely touted), but in a holding pattern. It is regulation with a 2-year window so it is something that seems to need immediate attention.
- Media Literacy – For Commissioner Copps, media literacy is the leading agenda point. While this did get attention in the media criticism track, it did not seem to be a serious focus of the conference.
- Public interest requirements in the transition to digital – This is an issue of major importance, because there should be some chance for traction. Many Scholars and other have written about the need for public interest requirements on broadcasters before the switch to digital. This, too, needs attention as the window of opportunity closes, perhaps, forever.
- Broadband – It is no secret to anyone that the United States is far behind many other (20, I believe) countries in our development of broadband. This is something that was mentioned in only one session that I was in. However, it is the backbone of information access.
- The New Media Giants -- In a world of changing media, the corporations are being called dinosaurs. I heard talk about NBC and Viacom and Disney, but not Google and Apple – the corporations most likely to have the biggest impact in our lives and the lives of most Americans looking into the future.
- Long-term plan – It is my sense, as is common in most organizations, that there is so much effort being applied to putting out fires, that little is being done in terms of envisioning the future. Corporations have 5-year and 10-year plans. If we don't try to set the agenda it will be set for us.

GROWING PAINS

While it is wonderful that the conference has grown to 3000+ attendees, there seem to be some growing pains in its evolution. The frustration with the agenda stems from the increasing number of people who have entered the tent – all of whom bring their ideas of what needs attention and focus. Because of this, there needs to be more input into what gets presented at this conference before the conference is put together. Funding seems to be a major issue for all cohorts, and these types of sessions would be helpful. Smaller sessions where people can network would also be of us.

The National Media Reform Conference needs to assess where it is and what it wants to be. It is moving into another stage of development. I thought it telling that in the email for the post conference the line was written, “If you found the pre-conference valuable, it is important that we hear from you.” I believe it was Bill Gates that said, You will learn

more from your critics than you ever will from your friends. Love Bill or hate him, I think we might have something to learn from him.