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MEMORANDUM

To: Professor Leonard M. Baynes
Director, Ronald H. Brown Center for Civil Rights and
Economic Development at
St. John's University School of Law

From: Akilah N. Folami

Date: January 24, 2007

Re: Reflections on the National Media Reform Conference

I would like to thank Leonard Baynes and the Ford Foundation for selecting me to serve as a delegate to the National Media Reform Conference, particularly because I write in the area of media consolidation and its chilling effect on radio of civic and political dialogue by marginalized groups of color. I am all the more indebted because I found particularly encouraging one of the Conference goals of bringing together people of various ethnicities, ages, and disciplines and involvement level (from the grass-roots organizers to the academics) to forge a mobilized affront to further media consolidation.

I. Accessibility and Timing

Two months ago, I testified before the FCC in Nashville, TN at its FCC public hearing on media ownership and consolidation, which was partially organized by Free Press. As soon as I arrived at Belmont University--the location of the hearing--the absence of people of color was immediately clear and evident, due in part to the remote location of Belmont University and to the early morning timing of the hearing. It was, therefore, quite refreshing upon arriving at the airport in Memphis to bump into people of color, of various age groups, who were headed to the National Media Reform Conference.

The Conference was held at a central location--downtown Memphis--at the Cook Convention Center. During the Conference, the Center was easy to maneuver with conference rooms for the panel discussions, restrooms, and vendors' spaces set-up near each other on three different levels of the Center. Transportation to the Center was also convenient and inexpensive, given that there was a Trolley stop located directly across the street to the entrance of the Center and that a shuttle service was provided to and from several nearby hotels. Restaurants were within walking distance, were very

accommodating, and reasonably priced. In addition, the Conference agenda was spread out over the course of three days, two of which included weekend days that preceded the Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday the following Monday. Peppered throughout the Conference agenda were “free” times for attendees to mingle, socialize and network---a necessity for coalition building. In all, logistically, I thought the Conference was well organized with volunteers stationed, and signs posted, throughout the Center appropriately directing attendees to their various desired locations.

II. Diversity of Attendees, Panel Participants, and Viewpoints

(a) Diversity of Attendees

As I noted above, it was quite welcoming to see people of color arriving at the Memphis Airport heading to the Conference. Especially eye catching was the presence of young attendees of color—some carrying camera and filming equipment. I would later learn that a few of these attendees were from Pacifica radio in California, others were musicians and college students, and still others were independent film makers who intended to stream their videos on the internet. Once I arrived at the Center, however, and as attendees began to show up for the Conference, the imbalance in a diverse representation of attendees again became clear. In fact, Reverend Jesse Jackson, while making the closing remarks to his keynote address, commented on the imbalance that was evident to him as he looked out at the audience, and encouraged Free Press and the other Conference organizers to make it a point, in mounting the Media Reform campaign, to get the word out to communities of color. He said the audience should include more Brown and Black faces, since, historically, people of color have been at the forefront of a media reform movement before it was given such a label—a sentiment I echo completely. While Free Press was active in getting the word out about the Conference on its website, StopBigMedia.com, and on the MediaDiversity listserv, I wondered, as I sat in the audience, to what extent the Conference was publicized beyond the internet to reach a broader audience, especially given the Digital Divide.

Later, I asked a spirited college student, majoring in Communications and Journalism, at a local historically Black College in Memphis how she learned of the Conference. I also asked her whether it was publicized at her school. She said that she had learned about the Conference while surfing the Internet two days before the Conference and that she had not seen any flyers or announcements about the Conference at her school or within her department. In forging a campaign to challenge media consolidation, an effort must be made to get the word out via various methods and mediums and outlets to notify and attract a broader audience, especially people of color, given the historical under-representation of people of color in several mainstream reform movements in the U.S.

(b) Diversity of Panels

While I found the number of attendees of color to the Conference disturbing, I was encouraged by the numerous panels, exploring issues of race and gender within the media and media images. To name a few, such panels included, Race and Gender Matter in Media Ownership, Media and the Immigrant Rights *Movimieneto*, Media Policy is a Civil Rights Issue, Diversity in Media Content and Representation, Bridging the Digital Divide, Ethnic Media: Voices of the New Majority, and the Media Diversity Summit. The Conference organizers did a good job at diversifying the panelists on these and other panels that were not clearly designated as relating to race, gender, or diversity issues. I attended several of these panels, as well as those that were, I assumed at first, directed towards attracting younger attendees. At these panels, which included the Making Our Voices Heard: Youth Media Across the Nation, Generation E: Organizing Youth to Reform Our Media, and the Make the Must with Your Mouth: Hip Hop Activism for Media Justice panels, I found a range

of ages represented among the audience members. It was at this last panel where one of the panel participants raised the question to why they—the younger panelist speakers—were primarily put on panels designated as relating to the youth, as well as at the Media Diversity Summit, where I was a panelist and where a young attendee quietly came up to us (the “older” panelists) and asked whether there were any young people on the panel, that it occurred to me that that was a good question. While I think it is a great idea to have panels specifically geared towards the younger attendees, it is also a good idea to here the viewpoints of young media reformers/independents on other panels not specifically designated as youth related. Judging from the mixed age of the audience members in the youth panels, it is evident, (which to me, is a good thing, particularly for building inter-generational alliances), that “older” participants are interested in hearing what the younger participants have to say and that the younger participants have a lot to say.

Finally, while, as I mentioned above, I thought the panel topics were diverse in many ways, I heartedly agreed with the sentiment of many attendees to which I spoke that thought there should have been a panel that related specifically to Katrina and its resulting devastation and media coverage. It seems that in every panel that I attended, an audience member raised issues related to Katrina, its aftermath, and the subsequent media coverage/images. Many attendees to the Make the Music With Your Mouth: Hip Hop Activism for Media Justice panel were outraged when a panelist on that panel angrily revealed that the Conference organizers, in the interest of space and time, cancelled a Katrina panel that was scheduled early on during the organizing process of the Conference. In fact, in the Media Diversity Summit Panel when a panelist asked the audience “where do go from here?”, one audience member, who introduced herself as an investor who had invested in this Conference and had attended the make the Music panel, stated that she was considering limiting or withdrawing her funding to the Conference/Free Press should the issues of diversity on panel selection and attendees not be addressed. While the panels where inclusive in many ways, in the future some attention should be given to the devastation left by Katrina in the effected areas, particularly given the dearth of media coverage in those areas right now.

(c) Diversity of Viewpoints

While conceptually, I agreed with the situating of the media consolidation as a civil rights issues which requires the mounting of a campaign similar to that of the Civil Rights Movement, in terms of mobilizing and organizing across various disciplines to forge a realistic challenge to the various underpinnings that have served as the support for, and basis of, media consolidation. The Conference in many ways did a great job in rallying the troops, with the battle cry of reform. I thought however that there should have been more panels focusing on addressing media consolidation in other ways beyond reform, such as supporting and encouraging independent media outlets, etc. There were two my knowledge two panels that related to independent media, although the issue came up over and over again at each of the sessions I attended—irrespective of panel topic.

I also thought that it would have been helpful to have a dialogue with those who were proponents of media consolidation to explore the policy and economic reasons that underlie it. While it is essential to mobilize and invigorate the troops, if you will, by not forging a dialogue with proponents of media consolidation, you preach only to the converted and erroneously assume that all proponents of media consolidation are the enemy to be avoided.

In closing, I am thankful to you for providing me with the opportunity to attend this Conference and to participate at the beginning stages of a movement that will continue to expand.

