

Notes on the National Conference for Media Reform

Memphis, Tennessee
January 11-14, 2007

By all accounts, this year's National Media Reform Conference (NMRC) was an enormous success. Conference organizers reported that over 3,500 people were in attendance. The city of Memphis proved a most hospitable and welcoming host. Most important perhaps, the timing of the meeting—the weekend before the Martin Luther King Jr. birthday observation—served to highlight the continued relevance of the civil rights movement to ongoing struggles for social and economic justice.

As several keynote speakers observed, the parallels between the struggles of the civil rights era and today's media reform movement are illuminating and instructive. For instance, veteran journalist Bill Moyers spoke eloquently of the need to end the "plantation mentality" that persists in contemporary American social institutions, most notably our media system. Media consolidation, Moyers argued, benefits only a handful of corporate media shareholders and excludes whole segments of the population from public discourse.

Filtered through the lens of commercial values and free market ideology, Moyers continued, the critical debates of our time—war and peace, health care, immigration, education, economic opportunity, race relations, environmental protection—reflect elite opinion, not the perspectives and everyday lived experience of the vast majority of the American people.

In his remarks, the Reverend Jesse Jackson called attention to mainstream media's distortion of Dr. King's memory. As Jackson explained, King was a media darling when he advocated non-violence, but a pariah when he took on structural inequalities, economic deprivation, and U.S. imperialism.

The tendency to tame King's legacy works in a more subtle fashion with the media framing of King's speech at the 1963 March on Washington. As Jackson explained, the media's ritualistic replay of the refrain "I Have a Dream" obscures King's principal rhetorical goal that day: the demand for payment on the promissory note, enshrined in the U.S. constitution, for equal rights and equal opportunity for

all Americans. Jackson's critique reminds us that the law of the land is meaningless if it is unequally applied and enforced.

When we take this insight to U.S. communication policy it is clear that media reform is a civil rights issue. Under law, broadcasters are required to serve "the public interest, convenience and necessity" but all too often, the private interests of Big Media trump the public interest. As a result, Jackson noted, the current media system "freezes out democracy ... [and] looks at the world through a key hole and not the door." Just as the civil rights movement confronted systems of domination and oppression, Jackson urged the audience to challenge the legitimacy of a media system that denies most Americans access to the channels of public communication.

A cursory examination of the 2007 NMRC program reveals an impressive variety of tactics and strategies employed by so-called ordinary Americans in taking up this challenge. Workshops on media literacy, low power FM, citizen's journalism, hip-hop activism, media monitoring, and the nuts and bolts of challenging broadcast licenses, to name but a few, indicate that media reform is emerging as popular movement akin to the struggle for civil rights a generation ago.

Conference participants came to Memphis with a reform agenda in mind. They left energized, better informed, and ready to take on Big Media at a critical juncture in the history of U.S. communication policy making. What follows are some thoughts—based on observations made during the NMRC—on the challenges and opportunities facing the media reform movement.

Ending the Media Blackout

The media blackout is one of the favored tactics used by Big Media to prevent popular participation in communication policy debates. With few exceptions, policy deliberations and regulatory rulings receive scant attention in the mainstream press. Tellingly, when these issues are covered, they are framed as a business story.

In doing so, Big Media accomplishes two related objectives. First, business news appeals to a relatively small audience and rarely includes any mention of the public interest

ramifications of industry developments and policy decisions. Second, by framing communication policy as a business story, Big Media "naturalizes" a commercial media system—one that conflates citizenship with consumerism and treats news, information and culture as commodity forms, rather than a public good.

The challenge confronting media reformers, then, is to "break the silence" surrounding communication policy. Herein lies the significance independent media plays in advancing a media reform agenda. Regardless of the form independent may take—community radio, alternative newsweeklies, blogs, or public access television—these outlets play a crucial role in following ongoing policy deliberations. What's more, citizens' media of this sort has helped mobilize public opinion against Big Media and galvanized a nascent media reform movement.

Consider, for example, the role independent and community media played in educating the American people of the significance of net neutrality. These efforts helped enlist broad-based support for organizations like Savetheinternet.com and other groups working to ensure non-discriminatory Internet access.

Similarly, independent media were instrumental in publicizing the FCC's suppression of the agency's own studies that found media consolidation threatened the principles of localism, diversity and competition that are the cornerstones of broadcast regulation. Were it not for independent media, the important work of media activists and policy analysts would never have been disseminated as quickly and efficiently as it had been.

The lesson is clear: anyone interested in substantive media reform should support independent, non-commercial and community-based media. Furthermore, media reformers must recognize the value these "alternative" media outlets have in countering the mainstream media blackout on communication policy. As Anthony Riddle of the Alliance for Community Media put it, media reformers need to "bring the noise" if they are to realize their goals. Independent media are valuable tools for community organizing and essential to ending the media blackout.

From Public Broadcasting to Public Media

It is no coincidence that the federal legislation that established public radio and television in this country was drafted during the civil rights era. At that time, widespread discontent with American values and institutions culminated in a number of significant social, political and cultural reforms. However, like civil rights legislation, the Public Broadcasting Act's full potential has not been fully realized.

Over the past quarter century, the gains made during the 1960s have come under attack from the right wing of American politics. The legal and judicial challenges to affirmative action, for instance, are directed by many of the same forces that routinely call for the elimination of federal appropriations for public broadcasting. Like affirmative action, then, public broadcasting has been under assault for the better part of its history.

For public broadcasting, the result has been an erosion of its institutional mandate. What was envisioned as a viable alternative to commercial broadcasting—one which took up controversial issues, reflected America's ethnic, racial and cultural diversity, and, most notably, gave "voice for groups in the community that may otherwise be unheard"—has all but abandoned its public service remit. Today, public broadcasting has little relevance for those very constituencies it was meant to serve.

This last point was made clear during the NMRC session "The Future of Public Broadcasting" where the number of white, middle class people in attendance far outnumbered youth and people of color. That said, session panelists and participants all agreed that, despite its flaws, the institution of public broadcasting deserves our continued support.

For instance, Peter Hart, of Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) argued forcefully that the American people ought not be content with simply defending the status quo at public broadcasting. Rather, media reform efforts should include a concerted effort to insulate public broadcasting from the political and economic pressures that have compromised its mission. Doing so would entail developing alternative funding mechanisms, such as a licensing fee, taxing businesses on advertising, or charging commercial broadcasters for their use of the spectrum.

At first blush, such propositions are political non-starters. However, as Wick Rowland of Colorado Public Television observed, as Congress considers rewriting the nation's telecommunications policy for the first time since the Telecommunications Act of 1996—a document which, as Rowland pointed out, did not include one mention of public broadcasting—the time is right to make demands for a more relevant, responsive and representative public broadcasting service. Ensuring the future editorial independence and financial stability of the public radio and television should be a critical component of any media reform agenda.

The "Future of Public Broadcasting" panel echoed the same concern articulated throughout the conference: that commercial and public broadcasters alike fail to fulfill their public service obligations. It was striking that across different sessions, from the "Media Diversity Summit" to panels on "Independent Media" and "Watchdogging the Media," conference participants insisted that we work to ensure and reinvigorate the public interest provisions of any rewrite of the nation's telecommunications law.

Viewed in this light, the term public broadcasting might be a bit outdated. At the advent of the digital era, public media may be a more inclusive term—one that not only embraces new cultural forms, like podcasting and blogging, but one that also embraces the public service ideal across media form and content.

The Future Looks Bright

In his closing remarks, Tennessee native Van Jones rallied conference attendees with the chant: "Davey D for the FCC." Jones' point was hard to miss. With the notable exception of commissioners Michael Copps and Jonathan Adelstein, the FCC has acquiesced to the interests of Big Media for most of its recent history. In the absence of a federal regulatory agency that fully accepts its charge—to serve the **public** interest—the people must pushback against Big Media at every turn. Jones's nomination of radio producer and hip-hop historian Davey D. serves to remind us of that popular participation in policy deliberations is a prerequisite for a democratic society.

If conference participants left Memphis with one message, it is this: The time to take up media reform is now!

Technological change has dramatically altered the dynamics of cultural production and opened up the possibility for radical remaking of our media system. Indeed, 2007 is shaping up to be a decisive year in the annals of U.S. communication policy making. And with a new, and potentially more sympathetic congressional leadership, it is conceivable that the media reform movement can move from a defensive posture and take up the offensive to reclaim the media.

This year's, NMRC helped energize and expand the movement at this critical juncture. The key is to build upon this momentum, to forge alliances within and between constituencies, and to "keep our eyes on the prize." Another media system is possible.

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