CHAPTER 5

Into the Labyrinth

Perspectives from the 2007 National Conference for Media Reform, Memphis

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In January 2007, nearly 3,500 activists, students, politicians, policy-makers, and journalists gathered for the third National Conference for Media Reform in Memphis, Tennessee. The size and diversity of the gathering—nearly double the attendance of the first conference in 2003—led keynote speaker Bill Moyers to proclaim, “This is a movement bursting at its seams.” Activist Jane Fonda urged the creation of “media that is powerful, not a media that serves the interests of the powerful.” The Reverend Jesse Jackson criticized the corporate media’s “lockout of people of color.”¹ And FCC Commissioner Michael J. Copps proposed a new “American Media Contract,” defining what broadcasters owe the public in return for use of the nation’s airwaves:

1. A right to media that strengthen our democracy.
2. A right to local stations that are actually local.
3. A right to media that looks and sounds like America.
4. A right to news that isn’t canned and radio playlists that aren’t for sale.
5. A right to programming that isn’t so damned bad so damned often.²

In addition to attending featured addresses, conference participants worked together in over one hundred panels and workshops, on topics ranging from civil rights and women’s rights to fair elections and Net Neutrality.
A team of seven represented Project Censored in Memphis: Censored Interns Camelia Gannon-Patino, Zoe Huffman, Jeff Huling, and Jenni Leys; Censored alumna and filmmaker Sandy Brown; and faculty members Peter Phillips and Andy Roth. This team spread the word about Project Censored and its current activities, visited the National Civil Rights Museum, and dined on Memphis’s famed barbeque (including portaballa mushrooms for the vegetarians). After long but exhilarating days at the Conference, the Censored team returned to Pilgrim House Hostel, where we sometimes ended the evening by walking the Hostel’s outdoor labyrinth.

Though the team’s Memphis experiences deserve a story of their own, this chapter reports on interviews conducted by Project Censored at the Media Reform Conference. Leys and Roth conducted thirteen formal interviews, which Huling and Brown filmed; team members supplemented these interviews with numerous informal conversations. We interviewed (in alphabetical order):

► Robin Andersen, professor of Communication and Media Studies at Fordham University, where she directs the Peace and Justice Studies Program;
► Joel Bleifuss, editor of *In These Times*;
► Jeff Chester, executive director of the Center for Digital Democracy;
► Mark Cooper, director of consumer research for the Consumer Federation of America;
► Michael Copps, FCC Commissioner;
► Deborah Frazier, community radio advocate and broadcaster, Bloomington, IN;
► Peter Hart, the activism director at Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR);
► Elizabeth Kucinich, British humanitarian and spouse of presidential candidate Rep. Dennis Kucinich (D-OH);
► Sarah Olson, independent journalist and radio producer;
► Anna Belle Peevey, journalist for the *Asheville Global Report* and coanchor, coeditor of *AGR-TV*;
► Federico Subervi, professor in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication, Texas State University-San Marcos, and director,
Latinos and Media Project;
➤ Sunsara Taylor, World Can’t Wait: Drive Out the Bush Regime, and writer for Revolution newspaper;
➤ Al White, director, Action Communication and Education Reform, Duckhill, Mississippi.

We sought our interviewees’ perspectives on:
➤ why media reform matters,
➤ what citizens need to know to be “media literate” in the twenty-first century,
➤ what role diversity plays in the media reform movement, and
➤ the effects of media consolidation on democracy.

Our interviewees all agreed that, “real news is democracy’s oxygen.”³ In the remainder of this chapter, we report in more detail their answers to our questions.

MEDIA LITERACY: INTERNET AND OTHER DEVELOPING TECHNOLOGIES

We asked our interviewees, “In the twenty-first century, what do citizens need to know to be media literate?” Many responded in terms of understanding new technology, and especially the Internet. New technologies have made the access to information and “the production of media very simple and very cheap,” according to Anna Belle Peavey of the Asheville Global Report (AGR). “We have so much at our fingertips and it’s just a matter of networking and collaborating enough to get it out there.” Peavey’s work in helping to launch AGR’s weekly television news program is one case in point.⁴

Mark Cooper (Consumer Federation of America) argues that the Internet “will be the dominant means of communication in the twenty-first century.”

Just as in the twentieth century, if you didn’t have a telephone, you couldn’t fully participate in our society; in the twenty-first century,
if you don’t have access to the Internet, particularly high speed Internet, you will not be able to participate.

Cooper described the 1934 Telecommunications Act, which promoted affordable telephone service for all, and called for a similar approach to the Internet today:

When [Congress] declared that goal, two-thirds of the American people did not have a telephone. It was genuinely a progressive goal in the sense that it set a target, an aspiration, for every American to have access, for a reasonable price, to the major means of communication in the twentieth century, the telephone. In the twenty-first century, the equivalent is high-speed Internet service, which is even more important than the telephone.

Cooper emphasized that, while telephone was primarily a method of personal communication, the Internet is more than that: it is also a vehicle of mass communication, which Cooper pointed out, the telephone was not. Thus, Cooper (and others) argue that the high-speed Internet represents “the convergence of mass communication and personal communication,” making it “an essential ingredient for being media-enabled in the twenty-first century.”

Deborah Frazier (WKSU, Kent, Ohio), Peter Hart (FAIR), and Al White (Action Communication and Education Reform) all expressed hope that newly developing media technologies would favor the public, save equality, and improve the political climate for social change.

Interviewees consistently stressed that, in its present state, no one owns the Internet. It is the first time in US history that a form of mass communication is not privately owned and, since the creation of the Federal Communication Commission, not regulated by the FCC. Because the Internet, in its present form, is neither owned nor regulated, most of its material is created and posted by common citizens. This distinguishes the Internet from other media. According to Cooper,

Sixty percent of the content on the web is produced by people. If you look at television, it’s almost zero. If you look at radio—talk radio—sometimes you get call-in shows, but it’s a small percentage.
If you look at the print media, letters to the editor, et cetera, [it is more like] one percent.

Increasingly, citizens access news and information, not through traditional media (for example newspapers), but through the Internet.

In consequence, Cooper argues that, “The corporations and government have lost control of speech. This scares them. They spend all their time trying to regain control of speech.” Major corporations are moving online to counter this. This is one reason why it is so important (again, in Cooper’s words) to “fight to prevent people from stopping us from speaking inside cyberspace.”

For similar reasons, numerous interviewees expressed concern over the future of Net Neutrality. Thus, Federico Subervi (professor of Journalism and Mass Communication at Texas State University-San Marcos) understands the goal of Internet access for all as means of including “more segments of society in the process of making decisions about their lives—economic, political, social, cultural decisions.” Robin Andersen (professor of Communication and Media Studies at Fordham University) described the Internet as a resource for expression of multiple perspectives, which must be heard and evaluated before we can make our own decisions. Joel Bleifuss echoed this point. Unfortunately, most of the corporate media present only “one side of the world,” which they try to sell to the public as “hard and fast reality.” If Net Neutrality is preserved, the Internet provides an alternative to this commodified, one-sided version of news. Specifically, the Internet can be one means that alternative media employ to put pressure on corporate media, “to have them redo stories that were inaccurately told,” says Anderson, noting counts of participants at antiwar demonstrations as one case in point. A robust, Internet-based press can push coverage of “stories that are important for the future of life on earth in many ways,” says Bleifuss, putting the corporate press “on notice that they’re being watched, that there are people who are doing these stories.”

Our interviewees also noted that new technology also has a potential down side. Jeff Chester (Center for Digital Democracy) notes that new digital media are designed “to enhance the power of the advertising/entertainment system” so that the public is increasingly “assaulted by
sophisticated interactive technologies designed to trivialize us as people.”

Similarly, Mark Cooper (Consumer Federation of America) expressed concern that blogging, which has flourished on the Internet, should not be understood as a substitute for investigative reporting. (For more on this, see a subsequent section of this chapter, “What is [and isn’t] ‘Journalism’?”).

AN (ILL-) INFORMED PUBLIC?

Our Memphis interviewees agreed that people must be informed to act effectively as citizens and community members. Conference attendees recognized a crucial gap, widened by disinformation and spin, between how informed the public believes it is and how informed it really is. We asked our interviewees what they understood as the sources of this disconnect, and how people can make themselves more media literate.

Sarah Olson told us that she “often hears journalists describe that they could not run a particular story because their editors said it was not something the audience would like. . . . There’s a demand for entertainment as well as the perception of a demand.” Al White also acknowledged that the corporate media have become more focused on entertainment rather information. He added that “corporate media has control over what the public sees. . . . Whoever controls the resources, controls who has access to it.” Thus, when we asked him about corporate media’s coverage of a number of sensitive topics (for example, the truth about 9/11, vote fraud, impeachment) he answered each question with a terse “Control and domination.”

Another interviewee, Anna Belle Peevey (Asheville Global Report) also emphasized the danger of people turning to media only for entertainment. She said that she had received an e-mail from a man who wrote that there was “no better cure for insomnia than to watch our show, because [we’re] so dull.” And I wanted to ask him, “Which particular story did you find dull? The fact that the United States just bombed Somalia with no pretense . . . or the fact the United States is selling oil rights to Iraqi crude? Which one of those was dull?
This made Peevey think, “Oh, of course, he finds it dull because we didn’t mention Rosie O’Donnell and we didn’t mention the lady who had sex with her.”

Several interviewees invoked Democracy Now! as an exemplar of how independent media can inform and mobilize increasingly large audiences. In particular, Peter Hart (FAIR) discussed how, six or seven years ago, Democracy Now! was just “a local show with a little bit of national distribution. Now it’s probably more known as a national show.” In its current form, most people “do not identify it as a local radio show at all.” Hart emphasized how this makes him hopeful: hard-hitting, truthful news will reach large audiences, when it is done correctly. Of course, there’s still the problem of people saying that they don’t want to listen to that kind of radio with their morning coffee.

So the American public is used to being entertained. How to inform them and ourselves? Luckily, we asked our interviewees that question, too.

Federico Subervi believes that the public needs to know “the impact of the marketing and advertising on their lives, the impact of the limited information about the politics in their daily lives, and [how] the decision makers got elected without [the public’s] full participation in the process.” Similarly, Sarah Olson advocates directing “attention to who and what is covered and how in the media—both the alternative and mainstream media, both commercial and independent press,” and increasing our “awareness of language.” If people only knew how much information is skewed or simply withheld from us, we would be enraged. The people would do something.

Robin Andersen told us that she thinks the real problem is that too many people in the country “assume that the media is fair, that it’s objective and telling a [single] story.” Instead, Anderson continues, “The media seems to be aligned by a very small group of people at the top who seem to be directing the country.” She suggests that conferences like Memphis help to sort out what is wrong, what we are missing, and what can be done. As the panels at the Media Conference made clear, there are numerous stories, interests, and processes that the corporate media do not make known.
Deborah Frazier takes a different approach. She articulates how the public “own[s] the airwaves and they need to take them back. No one ever told them that.” If the people just realized that they do, in fact, own the airwaves, then they just might do something constructive with their newfound ownership. Frazier advocates a vision of “community” in its most profound sense, advising us that,

We have to reach out to our friends and neighbors and to our communities on all levels, whether it is our politicians, whether it is our keepers of the gate as it were, in terms of the FCC and the different organizations that regulate the media, or corporations. All of those contacts are important, but we have to educate each other and ourselves. That means talking to each other, that means writing your newspaper, putting a letter to the editor in your local newspaper. That means not being afraid to speak out and to try to talk in terms that people can understand, because it really does affect their everyday lives.

Frazier also warned us about the FCC. She says that if people actually knew what the FCC was up to and what their policies were, they would not want them. If we want change, we have to meet in our town halls and vote.

Whether we’re changing the media through voicing an opinion on the radio or by telling our neighbor about the latest information on Lebanon, we know there is something to be done. With so many options it is hard to believe that not enough has been done to educate our friends and family. So arm yourselves with information.

WHAT IS (AND ISN’T) “JOURNALISM”?

Although we did not directly ask our Memphis interviewees this question, a number of them held strong, revealing opinions on what counts as “journalism,” as displayed in their responses to other questions. The Media Reform Conference participants that we interviewed regularly used the word “journalism” as a moral term, defining what is good and desirable.
Our interviewees thus distinguished journalism from other forms of mass mediated discourse.

Many of our interviewees provided a *negative* definition of journalism by identifying what does not count as journalism. For example, as previously noted, many of our interviewees distinguished between journalism and entertainment. Sarah Olson, told us,

> There is a perception that all there is in the media is entertainment. They [corporate media] work together to give you a really dumbed-down version of the news. . . . I personally don’t think it’s about entertainment. I think that most people here at the conference don’t think it is about entertainment either.

Instead, journalism requires (in Sunsara Taylor’s words) “real reporting” that satisfies the public’s hunger for “the truth” and “a real discussion of what’s at stake in the world.” Olson and Taylor establish a contrast between the values of truth and those of entertainment. By blurring the boundaries between news and entertainment, the news media fail in their responsibility to inform citizens.⁸

Entertainment values situate news viewers and readers as *consumers*, rather than as citizens, a theme that Joel Bleifuss, editor of *In These Times*, spoke passionately about. Bleifuss told us that it is important for people “to realize that they are not consumers,” and that too often the mass media “objectifies” them as such. As a result, it can seem that “your role in society is to buy and maybe to vote.” Instead, Bleifuss believes that journalism must nurture citizens’ awareness so that we “begin to question [our] place within the system.”

Mark Cooper (Consumer Federation of America) echoed these sentiments when he spoke critically about the increasingly prominent position of blogging,

> The blog is an extension of something that has always existed. It’s the water cooler conversation; it’s the garden fence; it’s the street corner chat, right? But it’s now blown up in scale, because you can talk to so many more people. But by itself, it’s not enough. I don’t have investigative journalism in the blogosphere. Almost all of it is
editorial opinion. Who’s going to investigate the politicians? Not just opine on what they did. So, blogging is great as a form of expression, but we really have a tremendous challenge in creating and sustaining an institution of journalism that gives me reporters digging up facts and editors checking the facts. There’s not a lot of that in the blogosphere.

Journalism, then, requires “digging up” and “checking the facts,” activities that may characterize some blogs, but are central to the work of investigative journalism.

Investigative reporting requires autonomy and independence, which Elizabeth Kucinich found lacking in the corporate media’s coverage of the onset of the war in Iraq:

When we look at the war with Iraq, we see how the media chose a position. They chose merely to repeat what people in authority said. They didn’t question, they didn’t analyze. There was a lack of journalism.

Thus, Kucinich links journalism with autonomous analysis of actual evidence.

Reporter Sarah Olson told us about her work on the story of Lieutenant Ehren Watada’s case, as an example of how government action can encroach on journalistic autonomy. At the time we spoke with her, Olson faced the likelihood of a subpoena in the military’s prosecution of Lt. Watada for his refusal to participate in the Iraq War. Based on her interviews of Watada, Olson expected to be called to testify in the case against him. She told us,

The idea of asking a journalist to participate in the prosecution of political speech is absolutely inimical to the idea of a free press . . . I’m concerned that this is an instance where they are asking a journalist to participate in suppression of this kind of speech. I don’t think it’s a reasonable thing to do. Also I don’t think asking journalists to participate in the prosecution of their sources is something that is, under basic journalist principles, an agreeable thing.
Instead, journalism requires free speech. Though many of our interviewees defined journalism in terms of what it is not, they also spoke affirmatively about what it is (or should be).

For Sunsara Taylor, good journalism requires a broad spectrum of information and opinion to identify the truth. Thus journalism addresses a broader spectrum of political debate than that defined by the Republicans and Democrats. . . . If the discourse in the popular media is between the Republicans and Democrats, and that is what is legitimate, then that is a very narrow discourse, and the criteria is not the truth.

This theme resonates with the findings of David Croteau and David Hoynes’s 1994 study of interviewed guests on ABC’s Nightline and PBS’s NewsHour. Croteau and Hoynes found that both programs presented a narrow spectrum of political perspectives, while giving the impression of rigorous debate. 10

Peter Hart (FAIR) spoke about the significance of Al Jazeera and the launch of its English-language broadcasts,

When you look at things like Al Jazeera it had become kind of synonymous with telling a different story. These are journalists, they do journalism. But it looks very different from the journalism we know. Why is that? It provokes a kind of discussion that I think is really helpful for our movement.

Again and again in our conversations and interviews in Memphis, we heard people asserting the importance of journalism representing a broad spectrum of voices, topics, and issues. This notion of a “broad spectrum” is currently being exploited by MSNBC in its “fuller spectrum of news” brand campaign. 11 But in Memphis, the people we spoke with about the future of journalism were less interested in branding, and more concerned with what sociologist Herbert Gans has characterized as a commitment to “multi-perspectival news.” 12
“THE CLAMP”: MEDIA OWNERSHIP AND DIVERSITY

Our interviewees agreed that ongoing consolidation of media ownership remains one of the greatest threats to the realization of multiperspectival news. Robin Andersen connected ownership and diversity succinctly: “The media is increasingly owned by a small group of people, designed around profit,” which exacerbates the need for “far more diversity and multiplicity of voices throughout.” She describes the consolidation, monopoly, and lack of regulation as a “clamp”: “We’ve had this clamp on American media for so long, centered around a kind of ‘mainstream’ view of America and certainly portrayed in the English language.” This clamp has “detached” the nation’s political leadership “from the grassroots of this country.”

“Clearly we need media as diverse as the population,” Mark Cooper asserted. He pointed to the fact that “the average American citizen lives in a state today that is 50 percent more diverse than it was thirty years ago. . . . Foreign language diverse media is critically necessary to reflect the diversity that is America.” Jeff Chester (Center for Digital Democracy) echoed this in expressing hope that the media reform movement would become an increasingly “multilingual, multi-culturally diverse movement.” Similarly Peter Hart (FAIR) asserted that “it’s difficult for those of us who only speak English to really appreciate what’s going on around the world.”

Several interviewees described the importance of Spanish-language radio in mobilizing immigrant communities during Fall 2006. Commenting on these successes, Sunsara Taylor (World Can’t Wait, Revolution) urged “progressive, responsible people in the English media to learn from what happened in the Spanish media.” Along similar lines, Federico Subervi (School of Journalism and Mass Communication, Texas State University-San Marcos) called for “studying Latino media at every level”—from children’s television to consumer issues to advertising to politics to ownership—as “indispensable” to media reform and democracy.

“If you just put the media out in one language,” Elizabeth Kucinich told us, “then you only communicate one line of thought, your only communicate with one community, the English-speaking community. As you can see, America is made up of hundreds of ethnic groups and that
should be embraced.” Anna Belle Peevey (Asheville Global Report) also understands the issue of media diversity in terms of community:

It’s all about building community, about networking. As immigration becomes a larger issue every single day, and Hispanics are a part of our community (as well as other ethnic groups, but primarily Hispanics), then we need to find ways to network and work together to spread the word. There needs to be a lot of education and that can only happen with the proliferation of media. It sure as hell isn’t being said on NBC or Fox News.

Media Matters for America’s May 2007 report substantiates Peevey’s criticism that the corporate media (e.g., NBC and Fox) do not support this type of community. “Locked Out: The Lack of Gender and Ethnic Diversity on Cable News Continues” reports that “cable news remains an overwhelmingly white and male preserve.” The report concludes: “If the cable news networks want their guests to represent the full spectrum of Americans, they have a long way to go.”

Our Memphis interviewees anticipated this critique, consistently calling for news that represents (in Robin Andersen’s words) “a multiplicity of voices and perspectives.”

**COVERAGE OF THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE FOR MEDIA REFORM**

A version of the “clamp” described by Anderson seemed to restrict corporate media coverage of the Memphis conference itself. We tracked corporate media coverage of the National Conference for Media Reform and found very little.

We used the Lexis-Nexis database, searching January 5-21, 2007 (a week before and a week after the conference). Using this time frame, we initially searched “general news” as the LexisNexis category and “major papers” as our source. We used “National Conference” and “Media Reform” as search terms. This produced just two news stories related to the Conference. A
subsequent search, on “National Conference for Media Reform” yielded nothing. Using the terms “Media Reform” and “Memphis,” generated the same two stories.

The first of the two stories “Bashed, Thrashed and Encouraged,” ran in the Seattle Times on January 19, 2007. The second story, “Reports Show Future Looks Strong for Media,” appeared in the January 12, 2007 issue of USA Today. These two articles seem to be polar opposites: The Seattle Times article focused on how mainstream journalists are portrayed as the cause of all problems in the media. Ryan Blethen’s report begins:

I did not go to Memphis to get mugged. But that is what it felt like sitting through the National Conference for Media Reform. The conference might have felt like an assault against a journalist like me who works at a metropolitan newspaper.

By contrast, the USA Today article emphasized an economic upside for TV and newspapers, despite the wave of new media. Using the same search terms and date range, we searched for coverage in magazines and journals. This search yielded nothing, as did a search of LexisNexis’s “Ethnic News” sources. We also searched for news transcripts, locating nine broadcasts that mentioned the Media Reform Conference. Most of these were brief reports.

The local media paid a little more attention to the conference. We searched “US News” with a focus on Tennessee news sources. This search yielded nine articles. The first two of these, “Veteran Washington Reporter Criticizes War Coverage” and “Critics of ‘Big Media’ Warn About Internet Freedom at Forum,” originated from the Associated Press’s State & Local Wire. A third article, “Media Reform Movement Chooses Memphis for Conference,” appeared, in advance of the conference, in Memphis’ trade paper, The Commercial Appeal. The Memphis Flyer ran six stories on the conference.

By contrast, numerous video clips from the 2007 Memphis Conference can be found on the YouTube.com Web site. When we used “NCMR” as a search term, no fewer than sixty video clips popped up from this year’s conference alone. (YouTube.com also includes videos from the previous two Media Reform conferences.) Using the search phrase “National
Conference for Media Reform” produced eighty hits. These clips mostly depict featured speakers, including numerous “celebrities” within the media reform movement: Bill Moyers, Amy Goodman, Jane Fonda, Rev. Jesse Jackson, Danny Glover, Representative Dennis Kucinich, Senator Bernie Sanders, and Project Censored’s own Peter Phillips.

The general findings of this research suggest that there was little to no corporate news coverage of the National Conference for Media Reform. It is alarming that a group forum addressing issues as important as the ones regarding today’s media was not given the coverage that it deserved. By contrast, the ready availability on the Internet (via YouTube.com and also the Free Press website) of video and audio recordings from the conference underscores our interviewees’ points about the importance of the Internet and Net Neutrality for truly democratic media.

**CONCLUSION**

In Plato’s *Euthydemus*, Socrates likens a discussion of “the kingly art” of politics to a labyrinth: just as the goal is in sight, the argument turns back on itself, leaving seekers of truth back “at the beginning, having still to seek as much as ever.” Our interviews with participants in the National Conference for Media Reform suggested a similar dynamic. Progress on issues such as media literacy and inclusivity, ownership and Net Neutrality bring us still closer to the goal of truly democratic media. But, as in a labyrinth, the path turns, and what seemed close at hand recedes into the distance: struggles remain, as all our interviewees agreed.

However, it is noteworthy, for both Socrates’ point and ours, that the chosen image is a *labyrinth*, rather than a *maze*. Although a maze includes paths that lead to dead ends, a true labyrinth contains a single path that eventually reaches its goal, despite the apparent turns and setbacks. At the end of the day, then, the image of a labyrinth, rather than a maze, best reflects the *optimism* of our Memphis interviewees. The path is long, and not always clear, but working together we will reach the common goal of more democratic media.
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2. See Michael J. Copps, “American Media Contract,”
3. See “Media Reform News: Media Reform in Five Words.”
   http://www.freepress.net/content/newsletter_v2n2_a7.
4. See http://www.agrnews.org/?section=tv for online episodes of Asheville Global Report TV.
8. On the important but increasingly blurred distinction between “news” and “entertainment,” see Samuel Winch’s underappreciated study, Mapping the Cultural Space of

   http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?ItemID=11978. See also 
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11. See, e.g.,
