

# Media Reform conference in Minneapolis: Criticism of the media, but a movement still in the orbit of the Democratic Party

## Part two

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*This is the second of two articles about the recent National Conference for Media Reform held in Minneapolis. (See Part one)*

There is a certain division of labor in these left liberal circles. Not everyone in attendance at the National Conference for Media Reform in Minneapolis last weekend was likely to be satisfied by paeans to this or that element of the Democratic Party. The latter's record since taking control of the Congress in 2006, and long before that, is hard to gloss over: continued support for the illegal wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, no opposition to the wholesale assault on democratic rights in the US.

Figures like Amy Goodman and Naomi Klein provide a more "left" face. They regularly expose and denounce the misdeeds of the US government and corporations at home and abroad.

In a panel on "Media and the War: An Unembedded View," Klein lambasted the "disastrous, illegal invasion" of Iraq, which has "largely disappeared from the mainstream media." She explained her view that the "war against terror ... doesn't make sense as a war at all ... from a military standpoint ... but it makes a great deal of sense from an economic standpoint." Klein urged her audience "to look at what has emerged since September 11 as a new economy in privatized warfare and so-called homeland security. It is a massive global industry."

She spoke about the "conflicts of interest" of the "disaster capitalists," such as George Shultz and Richard Perle, who advocate war and make fortunes from its prosecution. Neither Hillary Clinton nor Barack Obama is discussing these issues, Klein said, but made no other comment about the Democrats. She supported Democrat John Kerry in 2004, and will undoubtedly back Obama this year.

On the same panel, Goodman offered praise for Phil Donahue's documentary, *Body of War*, which treats the courageous struggle of Iraqi antiwar veteran Tomas Young, but concludes with a celebration of Democratic Sen. Robert Byrd of West Virginia and the minority of Democratic senators who voted against the war authorization in October 2002.

Goodman declared, "We must see the images of war until the war ends," and criticized the mass media for failing to cover the important stories. "We have to challenge the corporate media," she declared. The airwaves are "not private property." She concluded by calling for the revocation of the licenses of the television networks that were not acting in the public interest. This last, of course, is a fantasy.

The sterile "left" comments of Klein and Goodman leave unanswered on what concrete political basis broad layers of the population are to proceed and thus, in practice, leave the hegemony of the Democrats unchallenged. Insofar as the question of the Democratic Party is not addressed, the exposure of this or that crime can serve to strengthen the

illusion that the situation can be fundamentally improved within the framework of the existing social and political order.

This is the explicit view of the organizers of the conference. To a man or woman, this social element argues that "neo-liberalism" or "free market fundamentalism" or "crony capitalism" is merely a policy choice of a "neo-conservative clique," which can be altered by a change of the party in power or the application of popular pressure on the Democrats, or perhaps support for the pro-capitalist, halfway house of Green politics or Naderism. As one panel moderator commented on Sunday, "We can choose what kind of capitalism we want."

This is also a social layer quite distant from the desperate conditions facing tens of millions in the US and vast numbers internationally.

The concentration of media ownership, along with all the other characteristics of contemporary American and global capitalism, is not a subjective choice of Rupert Murdoch, Disney, Viacom, Verizon and their political representatives in Washington. These are tendencies inherent in the capitalist mode of production under conditions of a globally integrated economy. To demand the reduction or renewed national regulation of global corporate concentration, while retaining the profit system, is the most utopian and futile of perspectives.

The untenable character of a perspective based on pressuring the Democrats is not difficult to establish. A portion of the blame for the present media disaster can be attributed to the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which unleashed unprecedented deregulation and consolidation in the industry, a measure pushed through Congress and hailed by President Bill Clinton and Vice President Al Gore, a present-day hero in left liberal circles.

Clinton boasted that the "landmark legislation fulfills my administration's promise to reform our telecommunications laws in a manner that leads to competition and private investment, promotes universal service and provides for flexible government regulation."

In reality, as a 2005 report from Common Cause concluded, the act "did not deliver on its promise of more competition, more diversity, lower prices, more jobs and a booming economy. Instead, the public got more media concentration, less diversity, and higher prices.

"Over 10 years, the legislation was supposed to save consumers \$550 billion, including \$333 billion in lower long-distance rates, \$32 billion in lower local phone rates, and \$78 billion in lower cable bills. But cable rates have surged by about 50 percent, and local phone rates went up more than 20 percent.

"Industries supporting the new legislation predicted it would add 1.5 million jobs and boost the economy by \$2 trillion. By 2003, however, telecommunications companies' market value had fallen by about \$2

trillion, and they had shed half a million jobs.”

This was the fruit of the last Democratic Party administration, and a Barack Obama government would not do anything fundamentally different. In the 2008 election cycle so far, the communications and electronics industries have contributed two-thirds of their campaign cash, some \$43.6 million, to Democratic candidates. Obama has received \$10.2 million from this sector, compared to \$2.3 million for Arizona Senator John McCain, the presumptive Republican candidate.

The attachment to the Democratic Party runs deep in this milieu, for both ideological and social reasons. At a press conference, I asked Phil Donahue, given the record of the Democrats since 2006 and their full complicity in the Iraq war, “What confidence do we possibly have that an Obama government would halt the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and not launch new ones in Pakistan, Iran and elsewhere?” This led to the following reply and exchange:

Phil Donahue: “Well, we don’t, and we couldn’t if we elected Mother Teresa, we don’t know the future. But I think we have the right to believe that it’s going to be a hell of a lot better on January 21 [2009] than it is now. If you want to be suspicious, you can raise your level of cynicism to a point where you just don’t do anything. And I’ve seen that.”

David Walsh: “It’s not cynicism, it’s a question of creating an alternative.”

Phil Donahue: “You’re saying, ‘How do we know?’ I don’t know. I’m not sure what kind of an answer you’re looking for. I don’t know how I can help you with the answer to that question.”

David Walsh: “What is your opinion? What do you think he will do?”

Phil Donahue: “I would be very pleased to see a man of color get off Air Force One representing me at those big, super-duper conferences around the world.”

David Walsh: “But if the pine boxes continue to come back ... ?”

At this point the exchange was interrupted by the moderator of the press conference.

Robert McChesney, one of the leading lights of the media reform movement, speaks cogently and with obvious sincerity about the abject failure of the American media. Introducing on Saturday Bill Moyers, longtime host on the Public Broadcasting System, McChesney said:

“Our journalism is in crisis, deep, profound crisis. What passes for journalism today is far too often sound bites, inconsequential stenography of the people in power, taking their comments at face value. The range of debate in our journalism is too often determined by what the people in power debate among themselves.

“If the people in power ... are not debating the issue, then the journalists can’t raise the issue for fear of being called ‘ideological,’ or ‘partisan.’ It’s a type of journalism we’ve developed that is compatible with a society that is not democratic. It allows the people in power to set the terms and range of debate... It’s disastrous for a free society.”

However, he remains firmly oriented to the Democratic Party, one of the principal contributors to the situation he forcefully decries.

In a panel discussion Saturday on “From Broadcast to Broadband: The Next Frontier of Media Reform,” McChesney spoke guardedly about Obama (Free Press is a non-profit, non-partisan organization and cannot offer support officially to any political candidate). He suggested that while Obama’s media policy looked good on paper, the telecommunications giants contributed “enormous” amounts of money to the candidates and that “our job is to apply pressure” on Obama from the other side. “Our job doesn’t end if he’s elected, it begins—but at least we’re in play.”

A number of speakers referred, somewhat nervously, to the volatility in the present political situation and the weakening of long-lasting political allegiances.

David Sirota, a regular contributor to the *Nation* and *In These Times*, a former spokesman for Vermont’s Rep. Bernie Sanders and a co-founder of the Progressive States Network, which was set up by George Soros’s

Open Society Institute and various union bureaucracies, made this a central thrust of his remarks at the “Media and Elections: Uncovering 2008” seminar.

Sirota asserted that he had spent a year and a half researching his latest book, *The Uprising*, and “What I found was that people are not only angry at the media, but they’re fundamentally rejecting what the media is telling them.” He went on: “We are on the precipice of something big, that could be very, very good or very, very bad... The country is angrier than it’s ever been.”

At the same panel discussion, on the subject of possible electoral chicanery by the Republicans in the 2008 vote, the *Nation*’s John Nichols observed, “America had better get its [voting] machines right and it had better get this [election] straight. Because people were unbelievably and overly polite when the election of 2000 was stolen. And I am very uncomfortable with the notion, looking out over that electoral map, that Barack Obama might win the popular vote, as Al Gore did, and yet lose the Electoral College. It strikes me that ... I don’t know that this country could handle that.”

Whatever insights were offered this past weekend in Minneapolis, however, and there were some, and whatever criticisms were offered of contemporary American society, the media reform movement remains tied to the Democratic Party by a thousand threads, and through the latter, to the profit system.

The prejudice against socialism, encouraged by decades of officially sponsored anticommunism, goes unchallenged in these circles. And a serious, deep-going critique of American society, including its monstrous media apparatus, is unthinkable without the revival of socialist thought within the intelligentsia and broad layers of the population. A socialist program in regard to the media has to be developed and popularized, involving the nationalization of the major media conglomerates and their transformation into public utilities, democratically controlled. Information, culture and entertainment have to be liberated from corporate control.

Anticommunism, as opposed to socialist opposition to the Stalinist regimes in the USSR and elsewhere, became virtually a state religion in the US in the late 1940s and early 1950s. This resulted in the systematic elimination of left-wing opinion, its subsequent unavailability to the public. This was not simply a right-wing undertaking. American liberalism and the Democratic Party, in alliance with the state, settled accounts with their opponents on the left in the purges. The consequences of that process for political, social and cultural life have been disastrous.

No one in these circles speaks of this history, especially of the role played by liberalism. The Democratic Party was widely discredited in the 1950s and 1960s, identified as it was with anticommunism, corrupt machine politics, Jim Crow in the South and, eventually, the Vietnam War. The angry, mass protests outside the Democratic convention in 1968 did not come out of the blue. The repackaging of the Democrats, their respectability on the ‘left’ is of relatively recent origin.

I raised some of these issues at a press conference last Saturday attended by McChesney and Nichols.

I commented: “Yesterday there was some discussion of the shallowness of the election coverage. It seems to me this has a great deal to do with the exclusion of left-wing and socialist views. The Cold War hasn’t ended in the American media. To what extent is the rigid self-censorship of the media a lingering product of the anticommunist witch-hunts of the 1950s, which delegitimized left-wing thought?”

McChesney responded: “That’s a great question. There are so many layers to that.” He continued, “In the United States, you’re absolutely right,” the left (along with libertarian elements on the right) is “outside the legitimate frame of debate... It’s a major crisis. What we have in the United States in a nutshell is a political system in which the candidates who get taken seriously are candidates who have lots of money or

represent people with lots of money, one or both of those criteria, and if they don't meet those criteria, they're out of luck in the way our political system is set up."

The news media "in a credible democracy has two choices," McChesney said, "a fork in the road: it can reinforce that process and say, 'OK, Donald Trump has \$3 billion, so if he decides to run as an independent, he's a serious candidate, but Ralph Nader isn't, because he doesn't have \$3 billion.' Or, what a news media in a democratic society could do is say, 'We're not going to let money dictate who the serious candidates are, we think we have an obligation to cover all the candidates and let people decide.' Obviously, they know what they should do and obviously it is not what they do."

Nichols asserted that it "becomes exceptionally hard to explain capitalism without a critique. Someone can be a passionate capitalist and support the system, but when there is no critique it becomes very, very difficult. One need not be a socialist to see the value of socialist ideas being thrown into the mix. In most of the world, that is exceptionally common. It is a given. People would not imagine that you couldn't have this breadth of ideas, and then let people use it as they choose.

"In America, I believe very much as a legacy of the Cold War, we have a situation where there's a huge host of ideas and explanations and notions that would be valuable for advancing the discourse that are literally left out because most journalists are terrified to put them in. They think, 'Oh, people wouldn't stomach it.' ...

"The American people can handle a broad discourse, from left to right, from libertarian to socialist. Unfortunately, our media denies that to them and as a result, I think, causes a stilted discourse which makes it far less likely that we will solve real problems in this country."

McChesney put in, "I'd like to add one thing. It's worse than that. The media serves to police the borders of what is legitimate opinion and that's always the thing that makes you angriest, they're the border cops ..."

These are critical issues, facing not only the media reform movement, but the population as a whole. The question remains: to what extent will the media reform movement itself function as a "border cop" for the Democratic Party and official politics?

*Concluded*



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