

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

Part one

David Walsh
13 June 2008

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

Several thousand people gathered in Minneapolis June 6-8 for the fourth annual National Conference for Media Reform. The event, hosted by Free Press, was advertised by its organizers as an effort to bring together the “growing movement to create a more accountable, democratic and diverse media.”

Free Press is a non-profit group founded in 2002 by Robert McChesney, professor of communications at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and the author of numerous critical works on the American media, John Nichols of the *Nation* magazine and Josh Silver, currently the group’s executive director.

The theft of the 2000 election by the Bush camp, along with the deplorable role played by the media in that event, was one of the catalysts for the creation of Free Press.

The politically and intellectually degraded state of the American mass media is a pressing issue facing the US and, for that matter, global population. Over the past decade in particular—from its complicity in the manufactured sex scandal against Bill Clinton and the hijacking of the national vote in 2000, through its failure to ask questions about or investigate the events of September 11, 2001, to its criminal role in facilitating the war against Iraq—the American media has figured prominently in the assault on democratic rights at home and the drive for world domination by the US ruling elite around the world.

Executives at a handful of vast conglomerates determine what millions hear and see on a daily basis, covering up and distorting the truth or brazenly lying in defense of the profit system and their own personal wealth.

There is mounting disgust and outrage at this situation. This has found a certain expression in the growth of the media reform conferences over the past four years.

The sincerity of many of those in attendance in Minneapolis is not in question, but the perspective of the diverse group leading the conference, which is generally shared by many of the participants, is a hopeless one: to control or reduce the power of the conglomerates, defend public media and guarantee open access to the Internet by applying pressure on the Democratic Party, one of American capitalism’s two principal political instruments.

Many prominent figures of the liberal left made an appearance at the conference, including Amy Goodman of “Democracy Now!”; author and columnist Naomi Klein (*The Shock Doctrine*); Arianna Huffington of the *Huffington Post*; Norman Solomon of the Institute for Public Accuracy and Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR); Nichols of the *Nation*;

filmmaker Robert Greenwald (*Uncovered: The War on Iraq, Outfoxed*, etc.); author and columnist David Sirota (*The Uprising*) and numerous others.

Organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union, the National Organization for Women, the Electronic Frontier Foundation, the Consumers Union, CODEPINK, the Anti-Defamation League, the Southern Poverty Law Center and the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) were represented by speakers.

A variety of academics and journalists were also in attendance, along with a handful of union officials, as well as diverse figures such as novelist and political activist Walter Mosley; Craig Newmark, founder of Craigslist; Lizz Winstead, comedian and co-creator of “The Daily Show”; and David Cobb, the Green Party presidential candidate in 2004.

A number of Democratic Party politicians attended or sent video messages, including Senators Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota and Byron Dorgan of North Dakota and Representatives Keith Ellison of Minnesota and Mike Doyle of Pennsylvania. The two Democratic members of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), Michael Copps and Jonathan Adelstein, also appeared at the conference.

The lurch to the right by the mass media, dominated by a handful of conglomerates, has also impelled some formerly prominent media figures to speak out critically, in some cases after they themselves have come into conflict with higher-ups.

One of those most closely associated with the “media reform” movement is Bill Moyers, former White House press secretary under President Lyndon Johnson in the mid-1960s, former CBS news analyst and longtime host of his own programs on the Public Broadcasting System.

In his address to the conference Saturday morning, Moyers told the crowd that media consolidation was “a corrosive social force.” Such consolidation “pollutes the political culture” and turns political debate into “a shouting match” among “partisan apologists who trivialize democracy while refusing to speak the truth about how our country is being plundered.”

The American media, he said, is ultimately accountable to corporate boards concerned only with “the aggrandizement of corporate executives and shareholders.” Moyers warned that “without a truly free and independent press, this 250-year-old experiment in self-government will not make it.”

Toward the end of his address, he commented: “Extremes of wealth and poverty cannot be reconciled with a truly just society. Capitalism breeds great inequality that is destructive, unless tempered by an intuition for equality, which is the heart of democracy. When the state becomes the

guardian of power and privilege to the neglect of justice for the people who have neither power nor privilege, you can no longer claim to have a representative government.”

Another featured speaker was Dan Rather, “CBS Evening News” anchorman for 24 years, from 1981 to 2005. Rather became the victim of an orchestrated effort to purge him for airing a segment in 2004 on how George W. Bush had managed to get into the Texas Air National Guard during the Vietnam War, thus avoiding the possibility of being drafted.

The ultra-right launched a campaign against Rather, claiming that CBS had used forged documents to substantiate the charge against Bush, which has been amply proven. Following his forced resignation Rather launched a \$70-million law suit against CBS for damaging his reputation and violating his contract. He is still pursuing the case.

In his address to the conference in Minneapolis Saturday night, Rather noted that in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, America’s major “news organizations made a decision—consciously or unconsciously, but unquestionably in a climate of fear—to accept the overall narrative frame given them by the White House, a narrative that went like this: Saddam Hussein, brutal dictator, harbored weapons of mass destruction and, because of his supposed links to Al Qaeda, this could not be tolerated in a post-9/11 world.”

As CBS anchor, it should be said, Rather played his own role in that process.

He went on to argue that US news organizations over the past quarter-century have “fallen prey to merger after merger, acquisition after acquisition...to the point where they are, now, tiny parts of immeasurably larger corporate entities...These are entities that, as publicly-held and traded corporations, have as their overall, reigning mandate: Provide a return on shareholder value. Increase profits. And not over time, not over the long haul, but quarterly.”

He said that “quality news of integrity” is sure “to rock the boat now and then.” Serious news reporting will, “in that famous phrase, afflict the powerful and comfort the afflicted,” and this contradicts “the need to deliver shareholder value.”

In his concluding comments, Rather declared, “It means that we need to continue to let our government know that, when it comes to media consolidation, enough is enough. Too few voices are dominating, homogenizing and marginalizing the news. We need to demand that the American people get something in exchange for the use of airwaves that belong, after all, to the people.”

Earlier in the day, at a press conference, Rather decried the abandonment of the idea that “a public journal [is]... a public trust.” He advocated “keeping a small candle burning” for the idea “that news is to be reported in the public interest.” He later observed, “American journalism has lost its spine. It needs a spine transplant.”

The remarks of Moyers and Rather have a certain objective significance. Here were two erstwhile members of the media establishment painting a dire picture of the present situation and acknowledging that the existence of a handful of conglomerates is incompatible with honest news gathering and the existence of a democratic society.

Phil Donahue, host of his own popular television talk show for 27 years, appeared at the Minneapolis meeting, in part to promote his film, *Body of War*. Donahue’s primetime show on MSNBC, which had the cable channel’s highest ratings, was cancelled just weeks before the launching of the Iraq war in 2003. A memo from the channel’s executives has become public indicating their anxiety over criticism of the Bush administration made on the program.

Catherine Crier, formerly a CNN and Fox anchor and talk show host, correspondent for ABC’s “20/20” and “World News Tonight” and Court TV host, spoke at one of the conference’s panel discussions, as did New York-based CBS correspondent Randall Pinkston.

All in all, the Minneapolis conference was attended by the well-

intentioned and the not so well-intentioned, by genuine liberals and reform-minded individuals, on the one hand, and by the professional political watch dogs of the Democratic Party, on the other, ever vigilant and hostile to any trend or movement that might arise to the left of that party. The latter category includes those in and around publications such as the *Nation* and *In These Times*, Amy Goodman of “Democracy Now!” and others.

To a certain extent, the quasi-establishment figures make a more favorable impression, simply because they are more honest with themselves and their audience. They hardly pretend to be anything other than they are, disaffected liberals. The “left” elements, who claim to be staunch opponents of the status quo, are worse. They can never say what they truly think, always hold themselves in check, and are trained to detect anything that calls into question the existing political set-up. They are always dishonest.

A highly variegated group of people attended the Minneapolis conference, including a healthy number of social climbers and careerists. One speaker cheerfully made mention of the fact that at the next such conference, perhaps 18 months hence, the attendees would be concerned with problems of “governance,” i.e., that they would be participants in a Barack Obama administration. No doubt more than a few are salivating at that prospect.

At its heart the perspective of the media reform movement is essentially untenable. The consolidation of media ownership in a few hands and all its attendant ills—the trivialization and commercialization of content, the debasement of news coverage, the absence of critical thought in mainstream radio and television—are the inevitable product of private ownership of the vast communications and media resources.

The emphasis on “grassroots” efforts and “local” organizing (of a vague and unspecific character), while it may be sincere on the part of some, is an evasion of the problem: capitalism. Those who go on at length about the crimes of the American establishment, but either remain silent about the Democrats or offer indirect, shamefaced support, are evading the central political issue in American political life: the need to break from this imperialist party and construct a party of the working population along socialist and internationalist lines.

The relationship of the various forces in the leadership of the media reform movement is a fundamentally unprincipled one, because it depends on avoiding a discussion about critical historical and ideological questions: above all, the devil’s pact made by postwar liberalism with anti-communism and the consequences of that alliance, which still resonate today, including at the Minneapolis conference.

While no doubt principled in their own fashion, Moyers and Rather are representatives of Cold War liberalism, steeped in anti-communism. Other figures at the media reform conference come from left-wing or Stalinist backgrounds, but they keep their mouths shut, not wanting to create difficulties. They say many things, but they remain frightened of offering a serious critique of the profit system for fear of being called “communist.” (This did not prevent Fox News Channel’s Bill O’Reilly, Rupert Murdoch’s mouthpiece, from launching a hysterical attack on the “far left” conference, referring to the participants as “crazies” and “fascists.”)

While the most daring speakers last weekend could utter the word “capitalism” in one context or another, none, in my hearing at least, mentioned “socialism.” Thus the delegitimization of left-wing and socialist ideas continues into our day, despite the recognition by individuals in the media reform movement of its existence and pernicious impact. (See the exchange with Robert McChesney and John Nichols in the second part of this article.) The timidity and half-heartedness of the speakers are what gave the various presentations their unsatisfying, generally unconvincing and all too often tedious character. This was a conference of half-truths, of going so far...and no farther.

The reinforcement of illusions in the Democrats by the more conscious elements in this milieu takes various forms. Individuals like John Nichols of the *Nation* do not conceal their devotion to the Democrats. Nichols wrote a glowing tribute last week to Barack Obama, the Democrats' presumptive presidential candidate, declaring his securing of the presidential nomination "a historic moment for Obama, for the Democratic Party and for the American experiment."

In Minneapolis, on a panel devoted to a discussion of "Media and Elections: Uncovering 2008," Nichols not only made clear his uncritical support for Obama, but went out of his way to praise Sen. Hillary Clinton, whose vote in support of authorization for war in Iraq has discredited her in the eyes of many opponents of the US intervention. Nichols' job here was to shore up support for all wings of the Democratic Party.

Nichols told his somewhat bemused audience: "I want to pay tribute to a candidate today who's getting out of the race tomorrow. I know not everyone's pleased with Hillary Clinton, I know not everybody loved her, but I will tell you this: she forced the television networks to put some women on that bus as well, there were women commenting on this election who would not have been there if she hadn't been a candidate."

The *Nation's* Washington correspondent went on to denounce the "racist" and "sexist" media coverage of the Democratic race, omitting any serious discussion of the war or the mounting economic devastation facing wide layers of the population.

At the same time, when it is necessary, Nichols pays lip service to the need for "diversity" in the American political scene, criticizing on that same panel the efforts to exclude independent Ralph Nader from debates and coverage by the media. The *Nation*, of course, has done everything in its power to discredit and block the candidacy of independents like Cindy Sheehan, who is challenging Democratic Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi in San Francisco.

To be continued



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact