

Independent Reporting and the People's Media



Amy Goodman

*I*n this chapter, I want to show how independent media are essential to revive American democracy. The failure of the mainstream media to speak out on the invasion of Iraq heightened the need. “Terrorism” is being defined by establishment “experts” in ways destructive to long-term solutions. That is why dissent of mainstream media needs to become commonplace and why we need to better alternative venues of communication, like public-access television. There is hope: The media-reform movement is here to stay.

THE PACIFICA TRADITION

Founded in 1949, Pacifica Radio is the only independent media network in this country. It gives voice to the marginalized, to those who are not usually heard—people who are actually a majority in this country. When the marginalized speak for themselves, the caricatures and stereotypes that fuel hate groups can be broken down.

When it went on the air in 1970, Pacifica’s Houston station was blown up by the Ku Klux Klan. When the Grand Dragon went on trial, he said the Houston bombing was his proudest act—he understood how dangerous Pacifica Radio can be.

When Paul Robeson was whitelisted, or blacklisted, from almost everywhere in this country except a few black churches, he knew he could come to Pacifica Radio. He could go to KPFA and his voice would be broadcast.

When James Baldwin debated Malcolm X over the effectiveness of nonviolent civil disobedience and the effectiveness of sit-ins, the debates were broadcast on WBAI Radio in New York.

In the early 1950s, Pacifica pioneered the idea of listener support that we all know now from PBS and NPR. But the idea was not to turn to the corporations. Similar to how MoveOn appeals to its members (chapter 31), Pacifica turns to listeners and asks: If you appreciate what you hear, can you contribute something? It has stayed with that tradition for fifty-four years. PBS and NPR started with it, but while they have gone to “enhanced corporate underwriting,” Pacifica hasn’t. It is why we say we’re the only independent media network in this country.

INDEPENDENT REPORTING AND THE GULF WAR

Look at who owned the media during the first Gulf War. CBS then was owned by Westinghouse and NBC owned by General Electric. Westinghouse and General Electric are major nuclear weapons manufacturers. They made most of the parts for most of the weapons in the war. So was it any accident that what we saw on television was a military hardware show?

We so often saw reporters who were in those high-tech helicopters or tanks, talking about what it felt like and interviewing the soldiers who were operating them. But what did it feel like to be the civilian *target* of these weapons? That’s where the reporters should be as well.

The 2003 invasion of Iraq melded the military and the media more perfectly. We were introduced to the very appropriate phrase of “embedding” reporters in the military. We had reporters embedded on the front lines. Their lives depended on the soldiers who they were reporting on. But where were the reporters embedded in the Iraqi families in Baghdad? Where were the reporters embedded in the peace movement, to give us a picture everywhere of the responses to and the repercussions of the war?

Consider the playing cards with Iraqi officials on them that were given out by the American military in 2003. If you think the cards were given to American soldiers so that they could find and take in the Iraqi officials, think again. The playing cards were given out to reporters as part of a media ploy. When it reported that an Iraqi official had been caught, CNN would hold up his picture embedded in the playing card. So between the grainy images with the targets on them that we saw of the war, which looked like a video game, and the deck of cards, what was the American government conveying, especially to the young people in this country? That war is a game, that it is bloodless?

But what about the thousands of Iraqis who were killed? We heard and saw little of them, even though the role of the media is to convey the whole story. On “Democracy Now!” the program that I host, we did an interview for an hour with CNN anchor Aaron Brown. We asked him about CNN’s approach to the war. For example, we asked why CNN didn’t show pictures of casualties in Iraq. He said they’re

“tasteless.” War is tasteless. But if we go to war, I believe it is the responsibility of the media to show what is on the ground—the facts, the brutality of war.

Al-Jazeera was thrown off of the floor of the New York Stock Exchange and NASDAQ after it showed American soldiers who were prisoners of war. There was a discussion about not showing pictures of prisoners of war because doing so violated the Geneva Conventions. At the same time, there were big color pictures in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* of Iraqis, butt-up, face in the ground, in their underwear. These, too, were prisoners of war. They wouldn't show the Americans, but they would show the Iraqis. We need a single standard, especially as journalists. It will reduce a lot of the anger against Americans around the world.

SPEAKING OUT ON SEPTEMBER 11

This brings us back to September 11, 2001. Ironically enough, just a few blocks from ground zero in New York, “Democracy Now!” was programming on the significance of September 11, 1973, when Salvador Allende, the democratically elected leader of Chile, died in the palace as the U.S.-backed Pinochet regime rose to power. We were doing the show on September 11 because more declassified documents had come out further implicating Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon in the coup and in the rise to power of a man, Pinochet, who ended up killing thousands of Chileans and who ruled for seventeen years, to the benefit of corporations like ITT that had supported the coup.

President Bush came to ground zero a few days later. There was a chant that went up around him: “U-S-A! U-S-A!” Although I understood the sentiment, I thought, this was not the answer to what had taken place. The answer was, and is, a global community united against terror. In so many other cases that we cover day after day, people are terrorized by military regimes that have been supported by the United States. Americans need to learn that history, in order to change in the future.

Over and over, the media repeated that this was the first time terror has come to American shores. What about Native Americans? What about slavery? September 11 was horrible, the killing of people from 100 nations around the world. But we have to understand that September 11 fits into a continuum that cannot continue. We have to unite with people all over the world in changing American foreign policy.

PEOPLE OF SEPTEMBER 11 WHO CRITICIZED AMERICA'S FOREIGN POLICY

To illustrate the need to change our foreign policy, let me give you some September 11 stories that were not accurately or fully reported.

Right after September 11, people who lost loved ones at the World Trade Center started to speak out, people like Rita Lasar. She's a seventy-year-old woman who lost her brother, Abe Zelmanowitz, on the twenty-seventh floor of the World Trade Center. Abe wouldn't leave until the emergency workers came up for his best friend, Ed, who worked next to him and was a paraplegic. And so he waited, and he went down with so many others.

A few days later, President Bush invoked Abe Zelmanowitz's name at the National Cathedral speech in Washington, and Rita Lasar quickly understood what was happening. She wrote a letter to the *New York Times*, and it was published. She wrote: "Even as I know the worst pain of my life, it will not ameliorate it; it will not ease my suffering, to know that a sister in Afghanistan will lose her brother soon. Not in my brother's name, not in my name."

Phyllis and Orlando Rodriguez also were grieving. They lost their son, Greg, above the 100th floor of the World Trade Center. They too wrote a letter. It didn't get published anywhere, but it swirled around the Internet and said the same thing as Rita Lasar's letter: "It will only increase our pain to know that a mother and father in Afghanistan will experience the same kind of suffering that we feel today. Not in our son's name."

Then there's Jim Creedon. I met him the day the bombs started to fall in Afghanistan. In New York City, people marched from Union Square up to Times Square, to the armed forces recruiting station, holding signs in protest. James Creedon stood on a pickup truck and described his experience as an emergency worker. He had been injured on September 11, but went back to try to help other people. He spoke so eloquently against war, saying that he was trained to save lives and he didn't want to know that an emergency worker in Afghanistan would be digging through the rubble like he was. I thought there would be a long line of reporters who would interview him. So I raced over. And he was right outside the *New York Times*. But no, there was no one there. So I asked him if he would come on the show to talk about his experiences.

In its coverage of September 11, America's corporate media let some people like Rita Lasar, Phyllis and Orlando Rodriguez, and Jim Creedon talk of their pain and loved ones. But corporate media cut away when description changed to prescription and to their opposition to war. American media cut away to experts on terrorism, the Henry Kissingers and the Oliver Norths.

THE TERRORISM OF EXPERTS

Henry Kissinger said: "We not only have to go after the terrorists, we have to bomb the countries that harbor them." I started to get nervous, because I live in the same city as Henry Kissinger. Look at what happened in Chile and how deeply Kissinger

was involved with the subversion of that democratic government. And what resulted? Thousands of people were terrorized and killed. Americans now know the pain: We have our September 11, and so do they.

Look at Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Millions of people were terrorized and killed. Look at Indonesia; it was Henry Kissinger who, as secretary of state with then-President Ford, went to Indonesia and met face to face with Suharto the day before Indonesia invaded East Timor, December 7, 1975, and gave the go-ahead for that invasion.

Ninety percent of the weapons used by the Indonesian military against the people of East Timor were from the United States. The State Department clearly understood that it was in trouble, that the weapons were sold on the condition that they would not be used offensively. So the State Department sent Henry Kissinger a cable saying: We've got to deal with this or Congress is going to cut off military aid to Indonesia. Kissinger held a high-level meeting with his State Department officials and castigated them for leaving a paper trail by sending him the cables. He said: "We will not kick our ally in the teeth."

Kissinger knew exactly what was happening, and what ensued from 1975 until recently was one of the worst genocides of the twentieth century. The Indonesian military, armed to the teeth by the United States, trained and financed by America, killed off a third of the Timorese, 200,000 people. Proportionately, it was larger than what Pol Pot did in Cambodia.

The reason we know about Pol Pot's atrocities is that he was an official enemy of the United States. The president and the secretary of state continually spoke out against him, as they should have, and the papers dutifully reported. In the case of Indonesia invading East Timor, the United States sided with Suharto, the long-reigning dictator who killed so many of his own people in Indonesia, not to mention the Timorese.

From Ford to Carter to Reagan to Bush, right through the Clinton years, they continued to arm the Indonesian military until 1999 when the United Nations finally brokered an agreement that would allow the Timorese to do what they'd always asked for—simply to hold a referendum so they could decide their own future, a referendum for self-determination. They voted for their freedom.

In all of this, the role of the American media unfortunately followed a pattern. From the day after the invasion to 1991, not one word was mentioned about one of the great genocides of the twentieth century. For seventeen years, NBC, ABC, and CBS never mentioned the words "East Timor."

WHAT IS TERRORISM?

So my question is: What is terror, who represents terrorism, and how seriously can we take the media, given the media's decisions on who gets to be seen and heard?

Leading up to the war in Iraq, most Americans were opposed to invasion. And yet media personalities (I won't call them journalists) continually intoned that 90 percent of Americans were for war.

During that lead-up to invasion, a lot of people started to feel a bit crazy: Who is for this? And who was asked? Who was called and asked these questions? What were the questions that were asked, if in fact these polls were done?

"Do you believe the killing of innocent civilians should be avenged by the killing of innocent civilians?" I believe that, if asked this question, more than 90 percent of people in this country would say no. Americans are a compassionate people.

By beating the drums for war, the media "manufactures consent," as Noam Chomsky calls it. So it's quite amazing that, leading up to the invasion now of Iraq, most people still were opposed. Of course, that changed when the invasion actually happened, because people equate supporting the troops with somehow supporting the war and not wanting to threaten any American's life.

But until the point where the United States invaded, the majority of people were opposed. How was that reflected on television? Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting did a study. In the week leading up to the secretary of state making his case for war at the Security Council, and in the week afterwards, there were 393 interviews on the war done on the nightly news shows of NBC, CBS, ABC, and the PBS NewsHour with Jim Lehrer, the four major nightly newscasts. Only three interviews were with people opposed to the war.

It's not just Pacifica, NPR, and PBS that are using the public airwaves. It doesn't matter whether you were for the invasion of Iraq or not. The media have the responsibility to bring us the views of people all over the country and world. The people who were excluded were not the silent majority. They were a silenced majority, silenced by the mainstream media.

AMERICAN CENSORSHIP IN IRAQ

During the invasion of Iraq, al-Jazeera, the Mideast equivalent of CNN, showed non-stop casualties, dead children on the ground. I would bet that, if the American media had shown those pictures for a week and if there had not been censorship, Americans would have said, "There has got to be a better way." It is up to the media to tell the truth. Instead, we had Fox, MSNBC, and NBC name their coverage of the invasion the same name that the Pentagon gave it, Operation Iraqi Freedom. It's too bad the Pentagon didn't stick with its original name. Originally the Pentagon put forward: "Operation Iraqi Liberation." The problem was the acronym: O-I-L. So the Pentagon changed to: "Operation Iraqi Freedom."

During the war, Michael Moore gave a speech in which he called for the withdrawal of American troops from CBS, NBC, ABC, and CNN. We had situations

where people like Wesley Clark, on the payroll of CNN, were questioning an embedded reporter in the field who was dressed in the same kind of camouflage. You could not figure out whether he was a soldier or whether he was a reporter. General Clark was questioning the reporter, and the reporter was saying: "Yes, sir; no, sir; yes, sir."

As Julian Borger of the *Guardian* discusses in chapter 19, the response of the media outside this country was vastly different from the media inside this country. Outside, in Spain for example, the elite press went on strike for a day. Two Spanish reporters were killed. And they said no to the prime minister, we're not going to mark down your words. They said "shame" and they walked out to the American embassy, stopped traffic in the intersections, and shouted "murderer, murderer!"

COMMONPLACE DISSENT

Similar to the way Eli Pariser and MoveOn.org define reform in chapter 31, we need to challenge mainstream media to use the airwaves responsibly, but we also must build another kind of media.

That is what we are doing at Pacifica Radio and at "Democracy Now!" the national, daily, grassroots, human-rights news hour that I host. Two years ago, we were on about twenty radio stations. After September 11, we expanded to television. We are the only televised radio show in this country, and we are broadcasting now on more than 150 stations around the United States. We are broadcasting in a number of cities in Canada as well. Our radio broadcasts are based on low-cost, high-tech appropriate technology.

In television, we are bringing together the largest public media collaboration in this country, and it is absolutely essential we break the sound barrier. We are broadcasting on our original Pacifica radio stations, in five of the largest so-called markets in this country—Houston, Los Angeles, New York, Washington, and San Francisco. But we also are broadcasting on Pacifica affiliates around the country. For example, we are increasingly on NPR stations, because people who were originally with NPR started to question the dearth of alternative voices there. And in fact, NPR stations are raising more money in their fundraising drives on "Democracy Now!" than on "All Things Considered" and "Morning Edition."

As we have seen in the coalition against the FCC media-consolidation rules, lines are breaking down now between Democrats and Republicans, conservatives and liberals. The labels are not so easily attached. Conservatives, like progressives, deeply care about privacy, about corporate control of their lives, about people losing their pensions, and managers running away with the loot of these large corporations.

Pacifica's goal is to make dissent commonplace in this country, because that protects us all. That's what the media are for.

ALTERNATIVE VENUES

The public media collaboration we are involved with is broadcasting not only on radio stations, but also broadcasting on shortwave radio internationally, and through video and audio streaming at www.DemocracyNow.org. More than 20,000 people, inside and outside the United States, are hitting our site every day now.

Pacifica is broadcasting on public-access television, as well. This is a much-underutilized resource. Public-access television is very important in this country. How has public-access television developed? As the media monopolies moved in, and as cable moved from community to community, the company, let's say Comcast or AOL Time Warner, got a monopoly in a town. The town didn't want the roads ripped up every five minutes, so they granted the monopoly. But in exchange, the municipality or the city negotiated an agreement and said: "We want to make sure you assure there are some public-interest channels." And so they set those channels aside.

Many times, people in a community don't even know that they have public-access television, and certainly the company isn't going to tell them. So we go from community to community and tell people: "You know, you have these channels." Media activists go to their city council, and they see it written into the agreement, and the city council gets excited. They can broadcast their council hearings.

We need a people's media in this country. Public-access television is a cornerstone for that. And now, as the cable industry is getting older, the monopolies are in place, the cables are laid, and the communities renegotiate their contracts, the people often don't have the power to demand that these large companies keep the public-interest channels. So the companies take them away. A community might have four channels and might then get cut down to one.

But if people are informed, they can fight back and maintain those channels, and people can make their own media. When you make your own media, you are much more media-literate and you can even take on the mainstream media. You can say: I understand what they did here; where is that diversity of guests that we need? You start at the community level.

Pacifica is on public-access television on eighty stations. We now broadcast live, because we're also on satellite television. There's DirecTV and Dish Network. On Dish Network, we are on one nonprofit channel, called Free Speech TV, Channel 9415. Public-access television stations can get the dish, just like you can at home, put it on the station, and broadcast the show live.

So we can take on the major network morning shows. Before it was impossible because they spent millions in satellite technology that none of us could ever afford. But now we have simple, appropriate technology that allows us to broadcast live around the country. Every single community can model its own human rights, grass-roots news hours, bringing together the local and the global, and see it as very

doable, and then take on the networks and say, where are these other voices? It's all part of a continuum.

That continuum must include low-power FM. It's where people start. It's something that was defeated by the last Congress. Unfortunately, the charge against lower-power FM was led by the National Association of Broadcasters, lobbying Republican senators, and National Public Radio, lobbying Democratic senators. It was a stealth campaign, and they won. I went to the NPR national board meetings and saw some of the dissident general managers, saying: "Why are we opposing low-power FM? This is how we got our start, this is where we get our people, and now we are squelching it so that those people can't grow up and have local community control."

THE GOOD NEWS

But the good news is that there is hope. We can be successful in lobbying Congress and fighting back on a wide variety of issues—based on the success of the campaign against FCC media consolidation. Pacifica Radio played its part, broadcasting the alternative hearings that were held by the two dissident commissioners, Adelstein and Copps, who refused to go along with Michael Powell and the other two commissioners. The dissidents said: "We're not just going to have one public hearing; we don't care if you make this official or not, we'll go from community to community."

In the Pacifica broadcasts of these hearings, thousands of people were heard from, around the country and across the political spectrum. As one consequence, Michael Powell was raked over the coals by the Senate Commerce Committee—by Trent Lott and Barbara Boxer—because, when people found out what was happening, they protested the kind of absolute corporate gift that was being given to these companies.

The mainstream television networks didn't cover the story, but did file a brief with the FCC in support of media consolidation. Still, the people learned through alternate media, like MoveOn.org and MediaReform.net, and through lobbying across the political spectrum, from Code Pink to the National Rifle Association.

The media-reform movement is here to stay, and that movement has the potential to lobby on a wide variety of issues, from low-power FM and public access to broader antitrust policies. I'm hopeful, too, when I see how the death row of Illinois is empty now. That's because of grassroots activists, starting with mothers of men on death row, who have now, one by one, been exonerated, and including many others. Their work led to crusading reports in the *Chicago Tribune* about the disparity, particularly the racial disparity, in the death penalty, which affected the conservative Republican Governor, George Ryan, who had to sign those death warrants. Ryan called for a moratorium, and now he's ended death row in Illinois.

I'm hopeful because on May 20, 2002, the people of Timor, after twenty-five years, celebrated their freedom. It was Independence Day. "Democracy Now!" on Pacifica was the only American network there for the week, sending daily, broadcast-quality reports over the Internet, which then aired on television around the country. On May 20, 2002, we joined with 100,000 Timorese as they watched the flag of the Democratic Republic of East Timor raised, and this nation of survivors celebrated its freedom.

And I'm hopeful because of books like this, looking at the future. Where do we go from here in this post-invasion America, in this post-September 11 America? I think we've learned a tremendous lesson—that a global community can unify against terrorism.

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