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## Spring 2005: Media That Set Us Free

### Going to Where the Silence Is: Interview with Amy Goodman

print email

by Carolyn McConnell

President Bush's plans to partially privatize Social Security have blanketed the media in recent months. A top headline on NPR's Morning Edition, for example, on December 16, was "Bush's plan to reform Social Security." The show aired a clip of Bush claiming that Social Security is in crisis and that our record budget deficits are caused by shortfalls in the program. Cut to next story—we heard no follow-up, no checking on whether there's any truth to the claim (in fact, the reverse is true—the Social Security trust fund is subsidizing the rest of the federal budget). It's as if there are no facts beyond what the president says. You'd never know by listening to Morning Edition's segment that there is a controversy over whether Social Security is really in crisis.



photo by Jason Houston

Contrast that with the December 15 radio and television broadcast of the independent news program Democracy Now! After listening to guests debating the merits of privatizing Social Security, the host, Amy Goodman, asks a question that shows she's done her homework:

"... Every leading Republican proposal acknowledges that private accounts by themselves do little to solve the system's projected shortfall ... Instead, these proposals rely on deep cuts in benefits to future retirees. ... The controller general of the Government Accountability Office ... said that the creation of private accounts for Social Security will not deal with the solvency and sustainability of the Social Security fund. Your response to that?"

It's a straightforward question, but it's the kind that sets Goodman's work apart day after day. It assumes there's a world of facts that listeners have a right to know and that her guests need to respond to. Spotlighting competitive spins on a controversial issue does not constitute good journalism. Facts coupled with a wide range of perspectives on those facts does. This simple journalistic premise underlies all of Goodman's work and has made her both the darling of the alternative media world and a recipient of mainstream journalism's highest honors, including the Robert F. Kennedy Prize for International Reporting, the George Polk Award, and the Alfred duPont-Columbia Journalism Award. Democracy Now! is now billing itself as the largest public media collaboration in the country. It is broadcast on 300 stations—and growing—and three years ago branched out into television, through both the DISH TV and Direct TV satellite television networks.

**CAROLYN:** Over the years, you've broken many stories that other journalists failed to investigate. For example, when most media were reporting that Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the president of Haiti, had fled his country in February 2004, you broke the news that he had been forced to leave. How did you do that?

**AMY:** We covered the U.S.-backed coup in Haiti as soon as it began. Aristide was sent into exile in the Central African Republic on a U.S. plane. The U.S. government said he had chosen to leave the country. But when Aristide got to the Central African Republic, a remote part of Africa, we spoke with him and he said that he was a victim of a modern kidnapping in the service of a coup d'etat backed by the United States. We broadcast that telephone call. Network reporters asked Rumsfeld, "Is it true what Democracy Now! is reporting?" and Rumsfeld had to respond. He said something like "That's ridiculous," but I've learned in my years as a journalist that when a politician says "That's ridiculous" you're probably on the right track.

Two weeks later, I went on a small plane with a delegation led by U.S. Representative Maxine Waters to return Aristide to this hemisphere. Democracy Now! aired the exclusive broadcast of this journey. When we returned from Africa with Aristide to Jamaica, where the Aristides had been invited by the prime minister, CNN called me on the tarmac to give a report. The Associated Press published our reports throughout the trip.

When network reporters use our stories to challenge Rumsfeld, when AP publishes our reports, and CNN broadcasts my report from Jamaica, that's what I call trickle-up journalism. Independent media can go to where the silence is and break the sound barrier, doing what the corporate networks refuse to do.

Democracy Now! continues to cover the invasion and occupation of Iraq with reports from unembedded journalists. We are called continually by mainstream journalists, both international press and press here, asking for our sources so they can follow up and take our stories.

Democracy Now! is not letting the Iraq war go from the foreground to the background, as many media are. Ultimately, what's important about our coverage is not whether we cover any individual story. It's really about drumbeat coverage and who gets interviewed regularly. It's not about the occasional exception. If I mention any story we covered, you might say, "Oh, I

once saw that in The New York Times." You might well have, but that's not what sinks into people's consciousness. It's what's on the front page day after day and who is interviewed—who is framing the story. That's what we do so differently.

**CAROLYN:** It seems that one of the things that can keep a story going is connections among independent media. You've been lauded for helping support other independent media.

**AMY:** I deeply believe that none of us can do it alone. In conjunction with the publication of *Exception to the Rulers*, the book I wrote with my brother David, we've been on a 100-city tour. Every step of the way we have supported independent media. We work with independent bookstores, local radio and television. For example, on Columbus Day—or Indigenous People's Day—weekend, we went up to WOJB, an Ojibwe reservation radio station in northern Wisconsin, to do a fundraiser. In Tampa, we helped WMNF, a community radio station, and Speak Up Tampa Bay, a public access television station, do a joint fundraiser. In northern California, when we did a sellout fundraiser at the Eureka municipal building, we worked with four stations—KIDE Native Radio; KHSU, Humboldt State University's NPR station; KMUD community radio; and Humboldt Community TV, the public access cable station—and an independent bookstore. I don't think they'd ever done an event together. It was an incredible moment of people feeling the power of independent media joining together.

**CAROLYN:** Do you see the launching of Air America as competition?

**AMY:** Oh no. The people at Air America are proud partisans, which is very different from what we do. But it's absolutely critical in this age of the greatest media consolidation our country has ever seen to have different voices out there.

I use the analogy of the Italian restaurants on my corner in New York City. When I first lived there, there was one Italian restaurant on the corner. Then across the street another Italian restaurant opened. The first Italian restaurant was terrified that they would lose business. But the business only grew. And then across the street another Italian restaurant opened. It only brought more people to that corner, because they knew it as an area to get Italian food, and it helped all the restaurants. Helping build diverse media outlets is about shoring up a democratic society.

**CAROLYN:** What inspires you to do the work you do?

**AMY:** My family inspires me. Both my parents were peace activists. My father deeply believed in community service. He worked to integrate the schools in New York. I would go with him at night to auditoriums, to meetings over busing and integration, where people would be screaming at each other. I watched him help guide the community to a less polarized position. My 107-year old grandmother inspires me to just keep going. The rest of my family, many of whom perished in the Holocaust, while others fled Europe before the Holocaust, inspire me with their belief that there could be a better world. Journalism is the avenue I chose to pursue that belief.

**CAROLYN:** The corporate media give you a measure of notice and grudging respect, but in the middle of a generally admiring Washington Post profile you're described as "beaming from some alternative left galaxy." How far out of the margins do you think your work reaches?

**AMY:** I think that we're reaching mainstream America. People across the political spectrum respond to our work. In Tampa, when we did the event there, 2,500 people packed the performing arts center. Tampa Bay is the home of Centcom, the U.S. military's central command, and of McDill Airbase. Soldiers come out to our talks. In fact, I just had to take a call from a soldier as I was talking to you. Soldiers, military families, people in intelligence, government employees who are tired of information being manipulated and misrepresented, conservative Republicans who deeply care about issues of privacy and corporate control and an out-of-control war budget, all respond to our work. We're reaching out way beyond any easily categorized population. I don't think the lines are as easy to draw any more, as the growth of Democracy Now! shows.

**CAROLYN:** American journalists typically define their role in terms of objectivity. How do you define the proper role of journalism?

**AMY:** The corporate media are the furthest thing I know from objective. They beat the drums for war. Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) did a study of coverage the week before and after Colin Powell gave his pitch for war at the UN Security Council on February 5, 2003. Of the 393 interviews about the coming war on the four major nightly newscasts—NBC, ABC, CBS, and the PBS Newshour with Jim Lehrer—in this critical period right before invasion, only three interviews were with anti-war representatives. That is not mainstream media. That didn't represent mainstream America, when most people were in favor of pursuing diplomacy and inspections rather than going to war. That's extreme media.

The media in this country reflect the spectrum of opinion between the Democrats and the Republicans. That's as far as it goes. The Democrats joined the Republicans in authorizing the invasion of Iraq, and so on that issue there was no diversity of opinion among people in power. Then, during the election campaign, media coverage of the war showed more debate on this issue. That was only because the Democrats had to distinguish themselves from the Republicans so they opened up the debate a bit. But now it closes down again.

Once the Democrats conceded the election, the media shut down on voting issues. They said, if Kerry conceded, what's to look at here? There's a great deal to look at. These are not Bush's or Kerry's votes to give up. They're the American people's votes, and they deserve all of their votes to be counted. But in the absence of dissent from people in power, the media would not stake out their own territory and do their own investigation of the election.

Journalism is the only profession explicitly protected by the U.S. Constitution, because journalists are supposed to be the check and balance on government. We're supposed to be holding those in power accountable. We're not supposed to be their megaphone. That's what the corporate media have become.

When those in power—both Democrats and Republicans—continually alleged that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, Democracy Now! was reporting on all the voices that said there were no such weapons.

When I've been on shows like *Hardball* and *Scarborough Country*, representatives of the

corporate media have said to me, "How were we supposed to know those claims were false, since the administration officials said they were true?" But it's not journalism's role to pass on opinions. It's journalism's role to get to the truth. Those in power are an increasingly small elite. That elite doesn't represent the mainstream view of people in this country or the world. Even if all those in power are in agreement, reporters should ask, is this true what they're saying?

**CAROLYN:** Do you think your work is going to need to change as a result of the elections?

**AMY:** No, I think we will continue to provide a forum for all different voices, paying particular attention to those who have been iced out of the media. I think the media should be a sanctuary for dissent. That's what makes this country healthy.

I think the media can build bridges in society between cultures and communities. But we need to hear people speaking for themselves. That breaks down bigotry and the stereotypes that fuel hatred. If you don't hear the voices of certain people, and you see them being demonized, it becomes easier to treat them as subhuman.

I think that the whole Abu Ghraib prison scandal began long before the first low-level soldier laid a finger on the Iraqi prisoners. I think it started here at home with an administration that demonizes whole populations. African Americans have always been targeted, and now Arab Americans, Muslims, people of South Asian descent are being targeted as well. The media rarely give voice to those populations. Instead, they bring us the small circle of pundits who know so little about so much, explaining the world to us. I think what makes Democracy Now! special is that we are a daily, global, grassroots, unembedded news hour committed to airing the voices of people all over the world.

For more information on where you can listen to Democracy Now! or for transcripts of its programs, go to [www.democracynow.org](http://www.democracynow.org).

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