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Not the Fake News

Amy Goodman's hard truth is the antidote to the corporatization—and worse—of broadcast journalism

By Rick Kleffel



Photograph by Chet Gordon

A Goodman Is Not Hard to Find: Amy Goodman's 'Democracy Now,' now carried on 500 radio stations, has become one of the leading antidotes to corporate broadcast news.

WHEN it comes to cutting through the noise of mainstream news, nobody beats Amy Goodman. In fact, with the help of her brother Dave Goodman and only a small support team, she often manages to beat out the corporate media in breaking news—perhaps most famously with her coverage of the Haitian coup in the early '90s. That story saw her and her crew nearly executed by soldiers, only one way in which Goodman has brought daring to the world of broadcast news. More commonly, it is her willingness to take on stories other media outlets won't touch; most recently, the possible use of Hurricane Katrina as an excuse for displacing the poor in New Orleans. *Metro* was lucky enough to get a moment of Goodman's free time; she will be speaking this week around the Bay Area and in Santa Cruz.

Metro: Your show 'Democracy Now!' has a huge following among those who mistrust the mainstream media, particularly here in the Bay Area. How do you aim to change how people get their news?

Amy Goodman: *Democracy Now!* is truly grassroots media—when we moved from WBAI to the Firehouse, we started just pointing cameras at our radio show. The look has developed slowly and carefully, with the addition of video news wire and still photo services, better equipment and the contributions of many skilled TV and film professionals. The format is critical, in that we do not hew to a so-called "show clock," where we have to dump out of an interview because of a scheduled commercial or underwriting break. People are hungry for information, and when they have access to a solid, well-prepared long-form interview, they really like it. That is why more and more people are tuning in to *Democracy Now!*, and why they are listening for longer and longer periods of time.

You started as a radio broadcast, and you've expanded into television and books. How have you managed the expansion and kept your focus on the stories that aren't getting attention from other sources? Do the new venues offer new opportunities to find and report news?

We focus on collecting and reporting solid, well-researched news. With the advent of multiplatform digital delivery, news providers like *Democracy Now!* have an opportunity to push the content out to different audiences at different times. One important way we do this is by recruiting volunteers to help produce the transcripts—this allows us to post the transcripts to the web for free access to the public, and for the news aggregators like News Google and Yahoo! news to crawl our site so the content is more widely available to the public. Digital audio files and now compressed video files are allowing incredible advances in relatively low-cost news gathering and news distribution. There are now increased opportunities for independent media and more than ever an increased need for it.

Can you tell us about the network of independent media, from bloggers and websites to podcasts and broadcasts, that you work with and draw on? Is there an organization that helps all these sources collate and disseminate information?

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We are constantly in touch with independent journalists. Many of them have blogs but write for prominent print outlets; many are full-time print reporters who get very little access to the broadcast media. We have worked with the global, grassroots media collective indymedia.org, since its inception at the protests against the WTO in Seattle in 1999. Commondreams.org is an excellent source for daily op-ed pieces and press releases from progressive organizations. Our producers have personal contacts with hundreds if not thousands of reporters, bloggers and other media watchers who direct and disseminate stories that we follow up on.

Your ability and willingness to get to dangerous places to report news before other sources is amazing. How do you get to these places and how do you make sure you get back with the story? Can you talk about the place you went that you found most frightening?

What makes a place dangerous is inevitably the presence of courageous people who are opposing some repressive force. There are repressive forces everywhere, whether they are states or organizations, but wherever they are, there is opposition. So the imperative to go to these places is simply to give the actions of these people in opposition the coverage that they deserve. It can be hard to gain access to some places. I was blacklisted by the government of Indonesia, labeled by that military dictatorship a "threat to national security," and kicked out of the country several times throughout the '90s. I may still be on the list. When going to Haiti during the coup of 1991-1994, I caught the last American Airlines flight before they stopped going to Port au Prince. The crew members begged me not to disembark. But I had seen the slaughter happening on the television news, and knew that I had to go there. Being a white American bequeaths an amount of protection in many of these areas, which is a privilege that we must employ when we can. This is no protection now in Iraq, for example, and that violent occupation has proven to be the most fatal for reporters and media workers.

One of the issues you've taken on recently is the insidious effect of 'fake news.' Could you talk about what fake news is, how we can spot it and how we, as an audience can combat it?

Fake news comes in many different stripes now—there is the comedic version popularized by Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert. That is clearly a parody. The harmful fakes are the produced "Video News Releases" or VNRs—produced by an advertiser to promote a product or service, but made to look like a news piece and distributed to news stations for carriage. What is shocking is that these news channels, many with their news staff slashed due to media consolidation, actually run these pieces. Then there is the fake news of government propaganda, perhaps the most dangerous. We have the Bush administration paying pundits to support policies, like Armstrong Williams being paid \$250,000 to write favorably on No Child Left Behind. And there are now U.S. government contractors being paid huge sums to pay Iraqi news outlets to carry their fake news pieces.

Amy and Dave Goodman are in the Bay Area to mark Democracy Now!'s 10th anniversary and the release of their second book, 'Static: Government Liars, Media Cheerleaders and the People Who Fight Back.' They will speak on Thursday, Sept. 14, at 7pm at First Congregational Church, 2501 Harrison at 25th Street, Oakland (for tickets and information call 510.848.6767 or visit KPFA.org); on Sunday, Sept. 17, at 10am in the Veterans Hall, 282 S. High St., Sebastopol, tickets \$10 door/\$5 for KRCB members; on Sunday, Sept. 17, at 1pm for A Celebration of Independent Media at Angelico Hall, Dominican University, on Acacia Avenue near Grand Ave, San Rafael, tickets \$18 door or in advance at Book Passage and Bedrock Music, students \$12; and on Sunday, Sept. 17, at 7pm at the Rio Theatre, 1205 Soquel Ave., Santa Cruz, tickets \$22 advance/\$26 door.

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