



11/10/04

Home

What's Going On
Calendar

Pen pals

Wanda's picks

Spiritual
Enlightenment
Spiritual News

Education
- new choice:



University of
Phoenix



DeVry University



Independent media our democracy needs

by *Dr. Carolyn L. Bennett*

This week's column comes from within a cocoon of self-imposed news blackout. I have heard no results from last night's presidential election, though I was at the center of voter action from early Tuesday morning until late Tuesday night. For the first time in my voting life, I was an election inspector for my county board of elections. I came away from that 17-hour experience tired to the bone but energized for having done the work, and willing to do it again. I also came away from that multi-partisan polling place having shared a feeling with my colleagues: That the campaign and election cycle had been the longest, costliest, most wasteful and tiring, hostile and divisive I have ever seen.

America's mass, corporate and corporation-dependent media were not the sole contributors, but they were major contributors. And no doubt they will continue to contribute to the mean-spirited, substance-less performance, the obscene waste of money, human life and potential, and the ugly fallout experienced in this election cycle – no matter who sits in the Oval Office and in the houses of Congress.

It is this repeated, collective sour performance of media, powerful people and politicians that beg us to inject ourselves with massive doses of independent media for the sake of preserving the foundations upon which we are built, and to which we aspire. Democracy cannot work unless people have "easy access to independent, diverse sources of news and information," says my favorite alternative news source.

Hear! Hear!

But corporate centralization and corporate-government dependence all but rule out any hope for U.S. democracy. The "last two decades have seen unprecedented corporate media consolidation," Democracy Now! reports. In 20 years, centralized corporate media ownership has leaped from 50 to six: In 2000, "just six corporations dominated the U.S. media." This includes television, radio, newspapers, magazines, music, publishing and film.

Cementing the corporate-government-media triangle is flowing cash: Corporate media outlets accept funding from major corporations and from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting; Corporation for Public Broadcasting board members are appointed by the White House and confirmed by the Senate. All are in the pockets of or have their hands out to corporate America.

For some time now I have depended on news media that are as far removed from corporate U.S. news media as I can get them. And in this column, I want to promote and introduce to some a few of my favorite U.S.-based independent media operations and programs.

National Public Radio used to be my favorite news and information source. In the Nixon impeachment era, I used to think National Public Radio and particularly its every-night-at-five "All Things Considered" program was top of the line in educational, informed, thorough news reporting and interviews in the public interest.

I don't think so any more. As ATC has grown in on-air time, it has grown in banality, repetitiveness, homogeneity and a transparent burden of corporate, ideological and partisan influence. Jesse Helms choked the public out of public radio and, I hear, public television as well.

If Americans want anything close to the truth, anything more than propaganda and brainwashing, more than corporate opinion masquerading as news, they had better turn off commercial network, cable, online and public audio and visual news and information. And turn on as many journalistically sound independent, alternative media sources as they can.

Pacifica Radio Network

Pacifica is the oldest and best of my favorite news, information, documentary, history archived sources accessible online. Pacifica is the Pacifica Foundation.

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Its underlying mission is peace. It evolved out of a concern about World War II. The foundation is the parent of Pacific Radio Network. Democracy Now! is part of that network.

Pacifica Radio Network is the world's first listener-sponsored radio network. It is comprised principally of five radio stations: KPFA in Berkeley, KPFK in Los Angeles, KPFT in Houston, WBAI in New York City and WPFW in Washington, D.C., where I first discovered Democracy Now! All of these can be found, accessed and, with proper equipment, listened to on the world wide web.

Pacifica's website says the mission of its radio operation is "to promote the full distribution of public information; to obtain access to sources of news not commonly brought together in the same medium; and to employ such varied sources in the public presentation of accurate, objective, comprehensive news on all matters vitally affecting the community." Its radio broadcasting operations generally are "to engage in any activity that shall contribute to a lasting understanding between nations and between individuals of all nations, races, creeds and colors; to gather and disseminate information on the causes of conflict between any and all of such groups; and through any and all means compatible with (Pacifica's) purposes to promote the study of political and economic problems and of the causes of religious, philosophical and racial antagonisms (<http://www.pacifica.org>).

Democracy Now!

Pacifica Radio's Democracy Now! boldly airs what collective corporate media censors. Hosted and co-founded by Amy Goodman, former WBAI journalist and author of "The Exception to the Rulers," Democracy Now! is a national daily independent award-winning news program that airs on more than 225 stations in North America. Though it is produced out of a community media center in New York City's Chinatown, Goodman has broadcast from studios throughout the United States, and not long ago she aired the program from CBC studios in Canada.

Its online pages say Democracy Now! leads the country in being the largest public media collaboration in the United States. It is broadcast on Pacifica, community and National Public Radio stations, public access cable television stations, satellite television (on Free Speech TV, channel 9415 of the DISH Network), shortwave radio and the internet.

Democracy Now's ongoing War and Peace Report provides audiences with access to people and perspectives rarely heard in the U.S. corporate-sponsored media. Its broadcasts include independent and international journalists, ordinary people from around the world who are directly affected by U.S. foreign policy, grassroots leaders and peace activists, artists, academics and independent analysts. The program has included clips from speeches by Howard Zinn, Alice Walker, Cornell West, Wangari Maathai and Fannie Lou Hamer; historical documentaries on past political party conventions; interviews with journalists on the ground in Haiti, Sudan, Iraq and Afghanistan, with parents of soldiers killed in Iraq, with 9/11 survivors against the invasion and occupation of Iraq; with protesters and activists on the streets and from jail during the 2004 Republican National Convention. Democracy Now!'s War and Peace Report hosts real debates between people who substantially disagree, such as between White House or Pentagon representatives on one side and grassroots activists on the other.

"Democracy Now! is not beholding to Jesse Helms or corporate America. It is "funded entirely through contributions from listeners, viewers, and foundations. (The program) does not accept advertisers, donations from corporations, or donations from governments" (<http://www.democracynow.org>).

Three other civil counter sources of news and information I find useful to us and for our democracy are the Independent Media Center, a worldwide media network started in Seattle, Wash., to cover the World Trade Organization; Free Speech Radio News, a break-away group of freelance reporters from Pacifica Foundation; and CounterSpin, a media watchdog and critic subsidiary of the FAIR, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, organization that publishes the media criticism and politics magazine Extra.

Indymedia

Indymedia is short for Independent Media Center. The Independent Media Center is a network of collectively run media outlets for the creation of radical, accurate and passionate tellings of the truth, according to its website. The center was established in 1999 by various independent and alternative media organizations and activists. Its purpose was to provide grassroots coverage of the World Trade Organization (WTO) protests in Seattle.

The center acted as a clearinghouse of information for journalists, and provided up-to-the-minute reports, photos, and audio and video footage through its website. Using the collected footage, the Seattle Independent Media Center produced a series of five documentaries, uplinked every day to satellite and distributed through the United States to public access stations. Through a decentralized and autonomous network over the next year, hundreds of media activists set up independent media centers in London, Canada, Mexico City, Prague, Belgium, France and Italy. Since then IMCs have been established on every continent (<http://www.indymedia.org>).

Free Speech Radio News

Free Speech Radio News is a daily half-hour progressive radio newscast. According to its website, the organization provides incisive news and analysis in the service of peace and social justice. It was founded by freelance journalists and is administered by a not-for-profit educational and tax exempt corporation called Pacifica Reporters Against Censorship (PRAC). More than 200 journalists affiliate with the organization and report from 40 states within the United States and 57 countries around the world – including Israel/Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, Argentina, Mexico and Nigeria (<http://www.fsrn.org>).

CounterSpin

CounterSpin provides a critical examination of major news stories and exposes what the mainstream media might have missed in their own coverage. According to its website, CounterSpin exposes and highlights biased and inaccurate news; censored stories; sexism, racism and homophobia in the news; the power of corporate influence; gaffes and goofs by leading TV pundits; TV news' narrow political spectrum; and attacks on free speech" (<http://www.fair.org/counterspin>).

Americans need independent media. Our democracy cannot survive without independent media.

In the Bay Area, all the independent media resources mentioned except Indymedia are available on Pacifica's KPFA 94.1FM. Dr. Carolyn L. Bennett is a lecturer, public affairs columnist and author of "Talking Back to Today's News," available from publishamerica.com and through Amazon. Email her at cwriter85@aol.com. Visit her on the web at <http://hometown.aol.com/cwriter85/index.html>. She lives in Rochester, N.Y.