



The Five Pillars: *Nonprofits and Media*

By Ruth McCambridge

"It is a cornerstone of virtually every democratic theory that the foundation of self government is having an informed citizenry."

Robert McChesney
author of *Rich Media, Poor Democracy*

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THERE IS A LONGSTANDING, RICH CONCEPTUAL and practical interconnection between the news media and nonprofits in this country. Both nonprofits and the media are creatures of the First Amendment. They are also both creatures of government subsidy, because both a "free press" and people's "free and active association" are considered to be essential for a healthy democracy and an informed citizenry.

The intention of this issue of the *Nonprofit Quarterly* is to help nonprofits think more strategically about how to affect the information environments in which they work, obviously a critical concern in their capacity to effect change. This is nothing new; the third sector has always played a role in providing and guarding the quality and diversity of information available to us as actors in democracy.

There are at least five ways in which this occurs:

- Nonprofits are often the delivery vehicles for independent media at the local and national

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levels—from public radio and television to neighborhood newspapers and Web sites. Independent media provides a diversity of voice and analysis that counterbalances commercial media conglomerates.

- Nonprofits help the public understand the media they are bombarded with by critiquing the frames used by mainstream news in describing communities or social issues and the accuracy of information purveyed by media.

- Nonprofits act as the organizers of policy advocacy campaigns to monitor and protect against regulatory changes that would aid media monopoly and to ensure the continued availability of subsidies and other aids to independent media.

- Nonprofits provide training and other support for media actors of all kinds.

- Nonprofits of all kinds have valuable information that should inform media and otherwise affect public opinion, community behavior, or policy when they work to surface alternate voices, perspectives, and visions and to have these included in public discourse.

Nonprofits as Vehicles for Independent Media

Independent media, which include print and broadcast outlets, exert a powerful influence in public life. They surface and explore issues that may not yet be in public discourse and present analyses or artistic endeavors that are challenging to the status quo in ways that might offend advertisers who are a big part of the commercial media's economic base. These functions are critical to an active and pluralistic democracy and a nation that values diversity.

Janine Jackson of Fairness & Accuracy In Reporting (FAIR) asserts that the reason independent media are so crucial is that dissenting or non-mainstream perspectives can have a role that they never get to have in mainstream media, meaning that they can start the story instead of just being the dissenting voice at the end of the article. She notes, "Independent media is crucial because it allows the development of what people call a 'counter-narrative.' In other words, you can develop a whole world view that talks about, for instance, looking at our economy from the perspective of workers. It mixes and democratizes information and provides space for expert analyses that would not necessarily be backed by big business or government. Your

analysis as a correcting force to society, whether it is about war or racism, can be fully explicated and illustrated, and that is what people value."

The economics of most independent media outlets are predictably tough. Some government subsidies do exist (for print media in the form of breaks for bulk mailing, and for broadcast media through the politically embattled Corporation for Public Broadcasting) but many nonprofit independent media outlets—print as well as broadcast—are, to some extent, dependent on subsidies from individual donors. Some are also dependent upon institutional donors. The relationship with institutional investors is considered to be something of a slippery slope by many observers who have criticisms of public radio for accepting large scale sponsorships from large for-profit and nonprofit organizations.

There are increasing numbers of independent media outlets online, either associated with existing print and broadcast outlets or entirely separate. The size, shape, and economics of these endeavors will be explored in an upcoming article.

Media Critique

Critiquing media is part of social change work. It has occurred congruent with many significant social movements in this country. Smart activists put time into understanding and countering the way media covers social issues, because how big media outlets define an issue will, left alone, often end up being the framework in which it is understood by the largest segment of the population.

Some involved in the 2003 media policy melee referenced below attribute the scale of the turnout to people's frustration with the quality of coverage of the 2000 election and the buildup to the Iraq war. This frustration was probably partially fueled by the critiquing mechanisms that have sprung up everywhere—online, in print, and on the alternative airwaves. One example of such a mechanism is CounterSpin, FAIR's weekly radio show heard on more than 135 noncommercial stations across the United States and Canada.

In its own words, "CounterSpin provides a critical examination of the major stories every week, and exposes what the mainstream media might have missed in their own coverage. Com-

binning lively discussion and a thoughtful media critique ... 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; attacks on free speech; and more."

But even if we are not in the business of critiquing media writ large, nonprofits working on virtually any social issue must remain vigilant, not just about keeping their own analysis on the page, but about watching carefully to understand where countervailing messages are being given—even inadvertently—by media outlets.

Supersized Monoculture

Who controls the news and information you receive? According to FAIR, which quotes the *Columbia Journalism Review's* ranking of media ownership, the following corporations control a vast swathe of our media environment, and they are making it pay. Here's who owns most of what America consumes in its media diet.¹

News Corporation holdings include: FOX Network, DirecTV, 34 TV stations, National Geographic Channel, FX, 20th Century Fox, the *New York Post*, Harper Collins Publishers, Regan Books, and sports teams. Revenues in 2003 : \$17.5 billion.



General Electric holdings include: NBC, Telemundo, Universal Pictures, Universal Parks & Resorts, CNBC, Bravo, MSNBC, and vast holdings in numerous other business sectors. Revenues in 2003 : \$134.2 billion.



Viacom holdings include: CBS and UPN networks, over 35 TV stations, MTV, Showtime, Nickelodeon, BET, Paramount Pictures, Blockbuster Video, more than 175 radio stations, Simon & Schuster, and vast billboard holdings. Revenues in 2003: \$26.6 billion.

TimeWarner holdings include: Warner Bros, AOL, CNN, HBO, Time Warner Cable, Turner (TNT, TBS), Cartoon Network, New Line Cinema, Castle Rock Entertainment, Atlantic Recordings, Elektra/Sire, Rhino, Time-Life Books, DC Comics, *Fortune*, *Sports Illustrated*, *People*, and Netscape Communications. Revenues in 2003: \$39.6 billion.



The Walt Disney Company holdings include: ABC, Disney Channel, ESPN, A&E, History Channel, E!, Buena Vista, Touchstone Pictures, 10 TV stations, more than 60 radio stations, ESPN Radio, Miramax Films, Hyperion Books, & theme parks. Revenues in 2003: \$28.4 billion.



Vivendi Universal owns: CANAL+, Cineplex Odeon Theatres (42%), MCA Records, PolyGram Records, Vivendi Telecom, and 26.8 million shares of TimeWarner stock. Revenues in 2003: €25.5 billion (roughly \$30.1 billion).



Bertelsmann AG's holdings include: 11 TV networks, Random House Publishing (which includes Alfred A. Knopf, Ballantine, Doubleday, among many others), BMG Music, Arista Records and RCA Records. Revenues in 2003: €16.8 billion (roughly \$19.8 billion).



Growing Alternatives

Increasingly, independent media providers, many of which are small nonprofits, are spread across the country and serve their audiences by going beyond soundbites to providing news and information that reflects the needs and concerns of their audiences. Also, there are a growing number of organizations that advocate on media policy. Two of the most prominent among these include Free Press (www.freepress.net) and FAIR (www.fair.org). FAIR's Web site includes a directory to more than 100 state and locally based media advocacy organizations.

1. Source: FAIR (www.freepress.net/content/ownership) and *Columbia Journalism Review* (www.cjr.org).

It is not just that we have the result of decades of bad policy behind us and undergirding the current constipated landscape of broadcast media that makes the job of media reform such a major cross-cutting concern, we also have in front of us a picture increasingly complicated by changes in technology and broadcasting, which can now span from the local to the global.

Karen Jeffreys talks in her article (page 22) about how the Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence (RICADV) worked with reporters to educate them about the issue of domestic violence. They were successful, but this was not an effort that stood only on the shoulders of RICADV. It was supported by campaigns beginning in the seventies to address and redefine violence against women, including how it was portrayed in the media. These campaigns were painful forays against established culture in which domestic violence spokespeople were often ridiculed. One must be thick-skinned to be able to effectively take on the task of critiquing the mainstream media for biases and distortions.

Policy Advocacy

While the First Amendment orders government not to censor publications, federal policy has a defining role on the shape, ownership, and distribution of media outlets—from subsidizing postal rates for periodicals to assigning and policing radio and television frequencies.

Radio and broadcast communications is the battlefield where many of the most recent policy battles have been fought. In 2003, much to the surprise of Michael Powell, then Chair of the Federal Communications Commission and son of Secretary of State Colin Powell, nonprofits of every stripe organized a massive campaign to halt rule changes that would have eased further restrictions on monopoly media. Powell complained that the normal rule-making process had been disrupted by “a concerted grass-roots effort to attack the commission from the outside in.”

It is no wonder Powell was surprised by the three million Americans who took the time to contact the FCC and Congress. Media policy has, for many years, been adjusted quite privately to suit and support the trend of increasing concentration of the corporate/commercial media. Powell had every reason to expect that the FCC would continue to travel that path with a few well chosen, well-heeled friends.

Still, it is not just that we have the result of decades of bad policy behind us and undergirding the current constipated landscape of broadcast media that makes the job of media reform such a major cross-cutting concern, we also have in front of us a picture increasingly

complicated by changes in technology and broadcasting, which can now span from the local to the global. Luckily, to help navigate this complexity we also have some excellent sources of analysis in media reform organizations like FAIR (www.fair.org) and Free Press (www.freepress.net) and hundreds of others that focus on media policy (see the Free Press Web site for listings of other organizations that are involved on media issues). We also have a much enlightened constituency in the American people. We need to always keep them informed and engaged on these issues, as well as the ones on which we work day to day.

Training and Supports for Media Actors

There is a long history in this country of nonprofits providing training and support for journalists and independent media. This effort has now gone global.

Philanthropy got involved early in endowing journalism programs at universities and colleges and in helping establish the ethical constructs that continue to guide that practice. Many foundations like the Knight Foundation, the Benton Foundation, Ford Foundation, Surdna Foundation, Carnegie Corporation of New York, and the Open Society Institute all remain active in supporting some element of media training, media policy, or direct production. In many cases their justification of this has to do with the promotion of democratic discourse.

As the story below reminds us, the outside world can be a fatally dangerous place for investigative reporters.

In 1976, *Arizona Republic* reporter Don Bolles . . . was called to meeting in a downtown Phoenix hotel by a source promising him information about land fraud involving organized crime. The source didn't show up. Bolles left the hotel, got into his car parked outside and turned the key. A powerful bomb ripped through the car, leaving Bolles mortally injured.

Over the next 10 days, doctors amputated both Bolles' legs and an arm, but could not save him.

His shocked . . . colleagues reacted in a way unprecedented and never copied since. They descended on Arizona for a massive investiga-

tion. They set out to find not Bolles' killer, but the sources of corruption so deep that a reporter could be killed in broad daylight in the middle of town. They were out to show organized crime leaders that killing a journalist would not stop reportage about them; it would increase it 100-fold.

Investigative Reporters and Editors
(www.ire.org)

Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE) was established in 1975 to provide a place where these important democratic actors could develop and promote their practice. The group runs trainings year round and sponsors one major conference each year. Recently, understanding that many of the issues that their members report on have global connections, IRE helped to found a global network of muckrakers.

Community Media: Interview With Dan Coughlin

Dan Coughlin, until recently, led a historic independent media endeavor in the five-station Pacifica Radio Network. Pacifica was founded in 1949 by three pacifists concerned that commercial media had collectively orchestrated a drumbeat for war. Their vision was to create a media institution run by journalists themselves, that would be responsive directly to its audience and could offer alternative points of view. The founders humbly sought to transform society—and in fact did, in ways that may be a bit more limited than they wished, but are nonetheless powerful.

As Coughlin tells the story, Pacifica raised and tested the theory of listener-supported radio, a concept born of a concern that radio was overly tied to commercial interests and that these interests produced a political point of view that was skewed. The idea that people would voluntarily pay for a product that was available free elsewhere on the dial was a counterintuitive notion, to say the least—but they did. He notes, “Now, 56 years later, listener-supported radio and television has become a critically important model on the landscape of broadcast media. It was institutionalized fairly quickly with the public broadcasting act of the '60s, the creation of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and National Public Radio. Still, this doesn't mean we can relax. Pacifica still struggles with critical concerns about how best to serve the public.

“There is a tradition within U.S. community media that radio stations should have a local characteristic. How does this jibe with a more expansive transformative vision on national and global issues? That is a traditional debate that goes on in commercial as well as non-commercial media, but now that debate has evolved because technology has evolved. What you now have, for instance, is a local radio station in Berkeley that has a transmitter serving

the local community. But because it might be carried on the Internet or satellite radio, it could potentially reach 3 billion people around the world. In recent years we at Pacifica have come up with this concept of a global community of local programming.

“Now you can re-conceptualize yourself from a local community station with one form of distribution to five or six or seven methods of distribution.”

Coughlin says that it is critical for independent media to keep pace with technology to maintain their influence as a counterbalance to corporate-controlled media. “One of our intentions is to restore a fairly traditional notion of journalism and the media as the fourth estate—as an institution or set of institutions that pass a critical eye on power and privilege, whether that be in your local community or at the national or international level. That is something that is being broadly debated in all kinds of media today, where media institutions have in the last several years become so closely identified with repeating the views of those in positions of power and privilege that they no longer have credibility. We saw that with the Iraq war. The whole consumption of the rationale for war has proved to be a pack of lies and yet the mass media went along with it. This was replicated at local and regional levels around the country where the commercial media have been so compromised either by their commercial relationships or by their need for advertising revenue or their relationships with government officials or others that they're no longer seen as truthful.

So, Coughlin asserts, the mission of Pacifica and the mission of independent media groups today is fairly simple: it's to reassert the traditional role of the mass media in a democracy, which is to act as a check and balance on other powerful sectors in the society.

It involves more than 40 nonprofit groups around the world—each advancing the practice of investigative journalism, sometimes in the most treacherous of circumstances.

Other nonprofits provide similar support to other actors in a free and diverse media environment. The Independent Press Association, for instance, supports and provides guidance to print publications on issues of financing, marketing, and production. Its listserv provides easy access to a seasoned membership full of answers to the odd question about “blow-in cards” and other necessary detritus of the profession.

In short, much nonprofit infrastructure exists behind the media screens we see.

Our Mission—If We Choose to Accept It

The rest of this issue is full of material about how to develop a communications plan, work well with reporters, bring constituent voices to the fore, involve ordinary people in framing stories about their own communities, and many other activities. Thinking through what we would like people to consider relative to issues in public discourse, how we would like them to behave differently—

toward the arts and the environment, toward gay and lesbian neighbors, toward the balance of large and small business in your neighborhood—this is what is at the core of our work. All of this requires informed, strategic, communications. It doesn’t have to be expensive or onerous, and it doesn’t have to be focused on what is traditionally thought of as media.

This is who nonprofits are. We are all about gathering people, about inviting and sharing personal stories that build into common concerns, and about developing analyses and strategies to make sure that people know how to guard or promote what is important in our communities, our country, and our world. This should not be a top-down endeavor for nonprofits, but one that promotes active participation in framing and addressing the issues that affect our lives.

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