

A News Media That Informs and Empowers

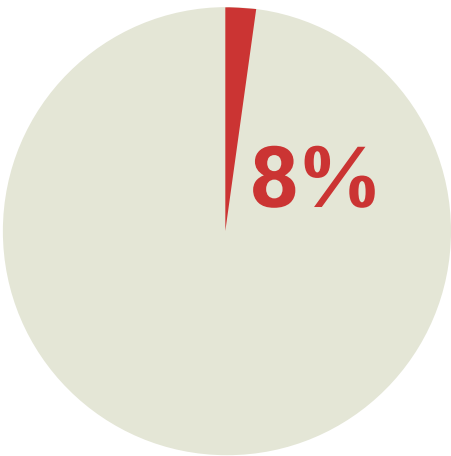
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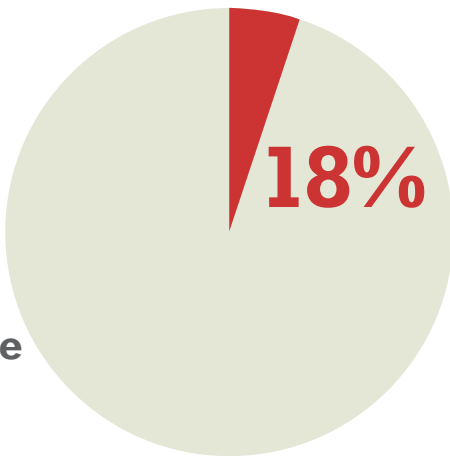
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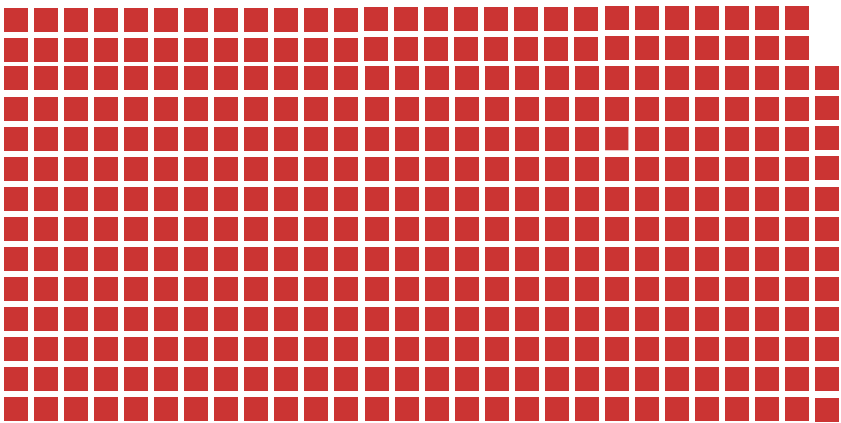
According to a recent citizen poll, only 8 percent of Americans said **they had a “great deal” of confidence in the national news media...**



and 18 percent said **they had “no confidence at all.”**



Interviews debating the Iraq War



Of the 393 major network interviews “debating” the Iraq War in the two weeks before the invasion, **just three were with individuals representing anti-war groups.**

VS. ■ ■ ■

61%

Percentage of Americans before the Iraq War began who thought the US should “wait and give the United Nations and weapons inspectors more time.”

Half of states no longer have a single reporter in Washington to keep their representatives accountable.



reporters in Washington

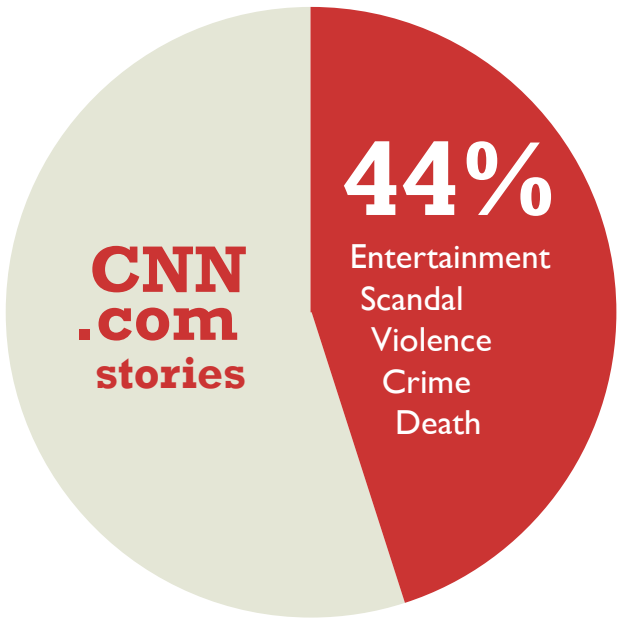
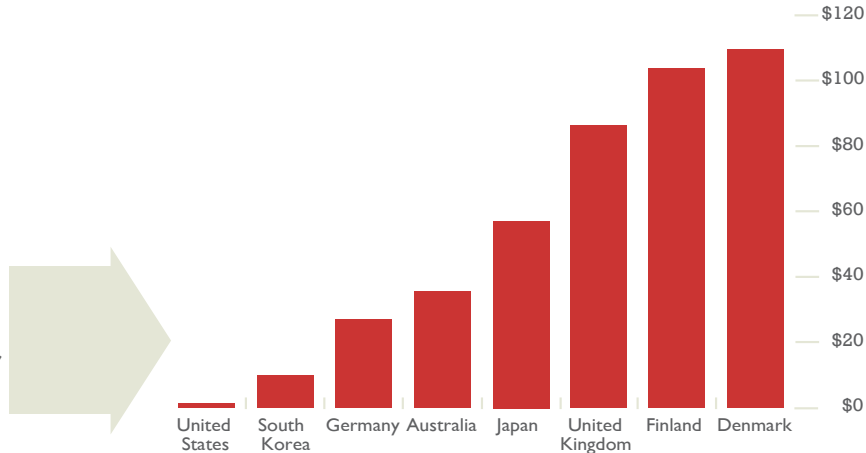
30,000

Members of the media laid off since 2008. With this many people, there is no shortage of experienced journalists to hire.

Today, **only 1 in 5 newspapers** are independently owned, which means fewer reporters and more generalized content.



Emphasizing public media is one solution, but the **United States spends far less** than any other industrialized democracy.



CNN.com was chosen for the study because of its balanced reputation and the good work that they do.

Over a month long period, CNN.com headlined

48 **celebrity news stories**

and **44% of all stories** were categorized as entertainment, scandal, violence, crime or death.

compared to

12%

Percentage of stories categorized as entertainment, scandal, violence, crime or death from the media outlet CommonDreams.org during the same time-frame. They featured zero celebrity headlines.

“**Harmony seldom makes a headline.**”

➤ **Silas Bent**

The news media is a lens through which we perceive the world. But the fact that more than half of the US public believes news organizations undermine our democracy reinforces the need to evaluate the role and responsibility of the news media. The over-saturation of coverage devoted to celebrities, fluff and violence does not contribute to an informed citizenry and does not protect our democracy.

Fortunately there are shining examples of independent and mainstream news organizations that are covering a wider range of topics and focusing on solutions-oriented stories.

A Civic-Minded Media Is...



Affirming that a strong democracy requires constructive journalism

Empowering people with information to shape the future

Serving as a check and balance to power

Choosing not to polarize, sensationalize and scandalize

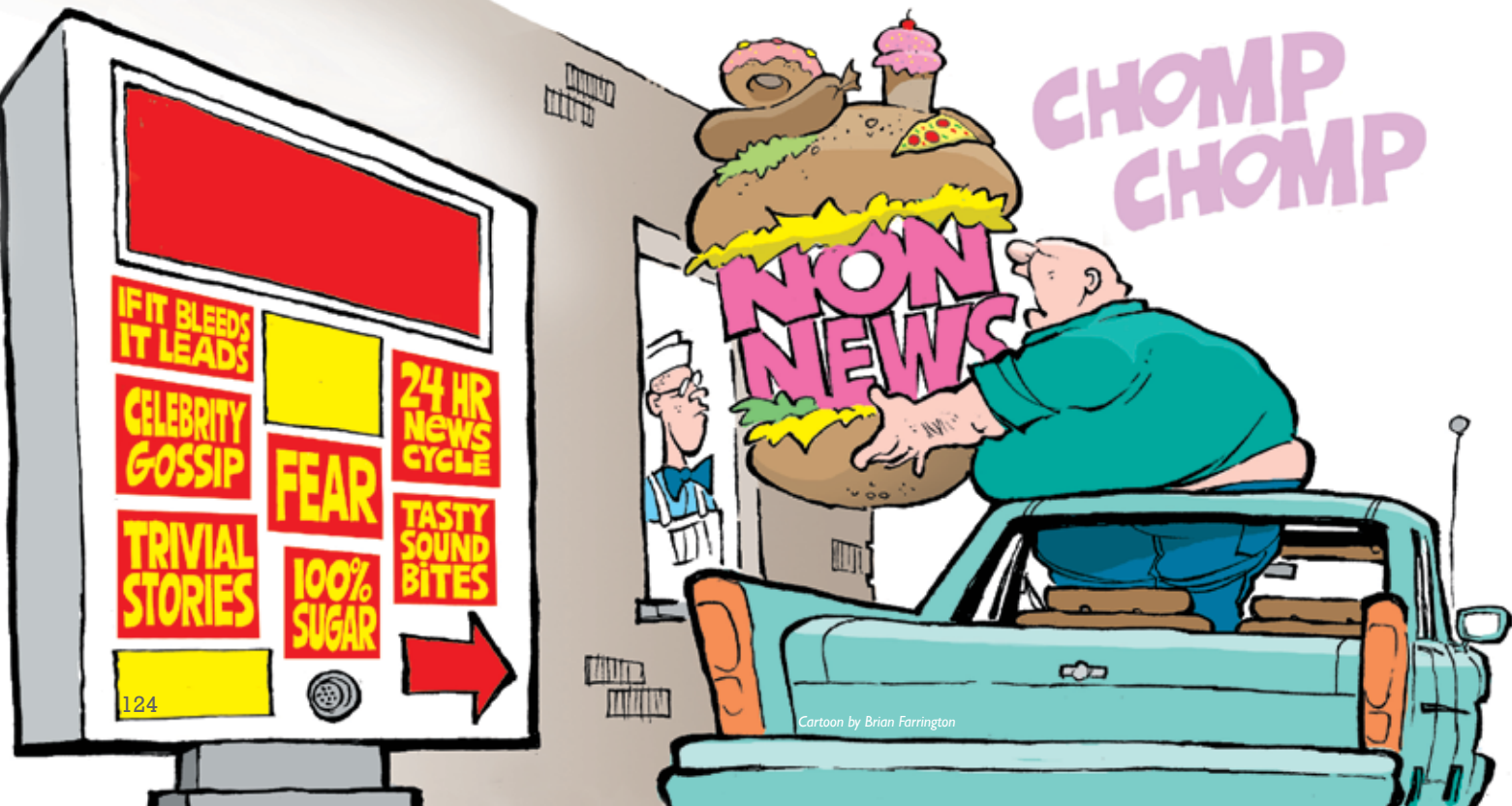
Focusing on exploring root causes to problems and solutions in addition to the news of the day

Balancing the need to prosper with the goal of contributing to the greater good

Media: A Tool for Strengthening Democracy

Thomas Jefferson wrote, “Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.” Jefferson lived at a time where there was perhaps the appearance of such an option—the US government was in its formative stages, and the free press, from pamphleteers like Thomas Paine to printers like Benjamin Franklin, played important roles.

... Amy Goodman
... Democracy Now!



There is a reason that a free press is enshrined in the US Constitution: journalists are the check and balance to power. We believe an independent media is an essential part of a functioning democracy.

The Media’s Role in Democracy

Now, we are in an age, and in a media environment, that Thomas Jefferson could very likely not have imagined. Yet he saw the importance of a vibrant, independent press. There is a reason that a free press is enshrined in the US Constitution: journalists are the check and balance to power. We believe an independent media is an essential part of a functioning democracy.

While the demise of many newspapers has rightly provoked concerns and discussion about the “crisis in journalism”—as literally tens of thousands of reporters, photographers, editors and support staff are laid off—many have perceived, for decades, a more fundamental crisis in journalism: the lack of independence in news organizations. At a time when newsrooms globally are

shrinking, or being eliminated entirely, this consistent, daily in-depth coverage of global news is critical.

Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) did a study during the two weeks around then-Secretary of State Colin Powell’s speech at the United Nations, making the case for war in Iraq, on February 5, 2003.¹ At the time of the speech, a CBS poll reported 61 percent of television viewers felt the US should “wait and give the United Nations and weapons inspectors more time.” In the two-week period, there were 393 interviews conducted about the invasion of Iraq on the four major US nightly newscasts: *ABC World News Tonight*, *CBS Evening News*, *NBC Nightly News* and PBS’s *NewsHour With Jim Lehrer*. Of those, only three of the nearly 400 interviews were with people who represented anti-war groups.²

FAIR also looked at the coverage of the US healthcare debate. In the week leading up to President Obama’s March 5, 2009 healthcare summit, according to FAIR, hundreds of stories in major newspapers and on major television network shows mentioned healthcare reform. Of those, only 18 mentioned the single-payer public option, none of which was on television. Most reports and interviews were from critics of single-payer. Only five single-payer advocates were quoted, at a time when polls indicated people in the US favored some form of public health insurance option over a strictly private option by a two-to-one margin.³

These attitudes are typified by recent polls and reports.

In a recent poll:

8% had a “great deal” of confidence in the national news media

18% had a “no confidence at all” in the national news media⁴

87% agree that celebrity scandals receive too much news coverage⁵

63% believe that news stories are often inaccurate⁶

Media Models that Work

The Internet and increasingly accessible digital technology have vastly leveled the media playing field, with many excellent examples.

Democracy Now! started in 1996 and was the only daily public broadcasting show devoted to covering the presidential election. The program began, in part, because we wanted to investigate why so many people didn’t participate and didn’t seem to care about politics. What we found were fascinating stories of people

engaged in grassroots organizing, building movements and organizations and focused the program around this vibrant world of democratic activity that was not getting any coverage at all from the mainstream media. After the election, the demand for the show remained, so it continued and today is broadcast on more than 850 radio and television stations around the world and online.

Yes! Magazine was founded in 1997 by economist, author and former Harvard professor David Korten as an advertising-free, non-profit print publication that “supports people’s active engagement in building a just and sustainable world.” Articles emphasize solutions in action that address ecological, social and political problems. Each issue features a series of articles focused on a theme along with coverage of issues such as health, climate change, globalization, media reform, faith, democracy, economy and labor, social and racial justice, and peace-building. Published by the Positive Futures Network, *Yes! Magazine* reaches hundreds of thousands of readers.

The Indypendent is a New York-based free newspaper published 17 times a year by a network of volunteers with a large and growing print and online readership. Since 2000, more than 650 citizen journalists, artists and media activists have participated in this project. *The Indypendent* is “dedicated to empowering people to create a true alternative by encouraging people to produce their own media.”⁷

CommonDreams.org is a shining example of web-based news coverage that informs and empowers. The national non-profit, non-partisan citizens’ organization was founded in 1997 with the belief that humanity “shares common dreams of peace and security, equal opportunity, and meaningful participation in our society.” Published online, the website features breaking news from a progressive perspective and attracts millions of readers each month. Common Dreams also publishes original articles and opinion pieces from a wide range of thought leaders.

It will take continued, concerted, national and global efforts to sustain the practice of independent reporting, to protect journalists in what is among the most dangerous of professions, and, ultimately, to empower people with the information they need to shape the future.

The Nation is yet another example of a media outlet dedicated to advancing critical thought and societal evolution. The oldest continuously published weekly magazine in the US, *The Nation* was founded in 1865 at the start of the Reconstruction as a supporter of the North in the American Civil War. Coverage is devoted to politics and culture and the publication’s weekly circulation is large and growing.

ProPublica is a non-profit, independent newsroom with a staff of 34 journalists dedicated to investigative reporting on stories with significant potential for major impact. Stories are published online and offered exclusively to traditional news organizations, free of charge, for publication or broadcast. Published in the *New York Times Magazine*, “The Deadly Choices at Memorial,”⁸ was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for Investigative Reporting. The 13,000-word *ProPublica* report chronicled what happened when Katrina’s floodwaters rose, the generators failed and hospitals were cut off from the world.⁹

Independent media outlets work daily to bring the best journalism possible to the widest audience. It will take continued, concerted, national and global efforts, to sustain the practice of independent reporting, to protect journalists in what is among the most dangerous professions, and, ultimately, to empower people with the information they need to shape the future. We need to continue supporting public and independent media

How to get news you can use:

① Subscribe to independent media.

Most independent media rely—solely or in part—on subscriptions and donations from listeners, viewers and readers.

② Encourage mainstream media to do better.

Let them know what you think of their news coverage and what kind of news you want.

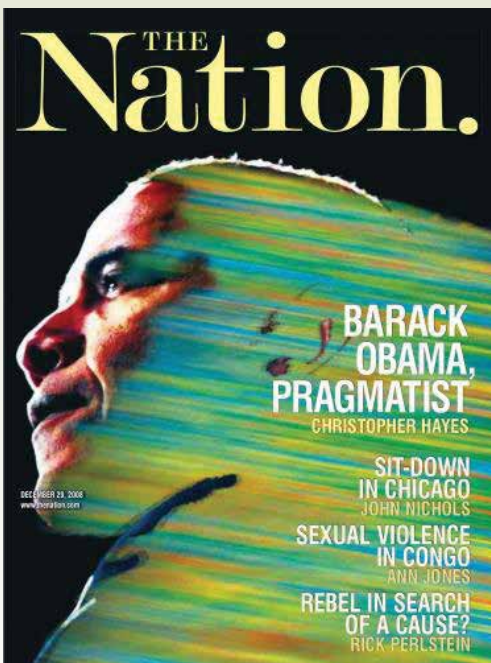
sources that strive to strengthen democracy by covering more issues that matter and by empowering people with fair and accurate news coverage.

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Amy Goodman is the host and executive producer of Democracy Now! Goodman is the author of four New York Times bestsellers including *Breaking the Sound Barrier*. Goodman is a recipient of Right Livelihood Award; Park Center for Independent Media’s Izzy Award; the American Women in Radio and Television Gracie Award; James Aronson Award for Social Justice Reporting; the Puffin/Nation Prize for Creative Citizenship; Robert F. Kennedy Prize for International Reporting among others. Democracy Now! is a national, daily, independent, award-winning news program. Pioneering the largest public media collaboration in the US, Democracy Now! is broadcast on Pacifica, NPR, community, and college radio stations; on public access, PBS, satellite television; and on the Internet at www.democracynow.org.



There are a number of independent news outlets that are working to shed light on the issues and information that are crucial for creating a positive future.



Making Coverage Count

Take a drive across the country, and you'll see varied landscapes, stumble across unique landmarks, taste new flavors and hear different accents. But people just about anywhere agree on one thing: their local news must be the worst in the country.

But it's not the worst. It's just the same. If it bleeds, it leads: that means plenty of crimes, fires and accidents. Then there are the healthcare stories, likely framed with frightening graphics and ominous music, celebrity gossip and network tie-ins.

Why We Need the News

TV, radio, movies, books, newspapers and the Internet are our prime sources of news and information, and they shape our values, beliefs and perspectives. When it comes to the news, we need credible, accurate reporters keeping a watchful eye on those in power, attending the meetings and examining the issues we don't have time to follow, translating complex topics and keeping us informed about what's happening in our communities.

A viable self-government is impossible without quality journalism. Democracy requires journalism; but journalism also requires democracy—an engaged citizenry demanding the serious work that holds our leaders accountable.

Often, the media covers the spin instead of cutting through it to get to

⋮ Craig Aaron
⋮ Free Press

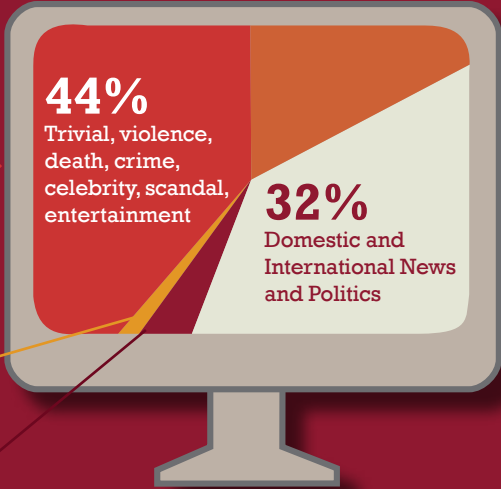
Covering More of What Matters

A Pew poll shows that Americans are hungry for news, spending 70 minutes a day accessing it.¹ Eighty-seven percent of Americans said that there's too much celebrity coverage in the news.² They feel environmental coverage should be an average of 18 percent of coverage instead of just 2 percent.

Unfortunately too many news programs ignore important issues and devote too much coverage to sensational and trivial stories. A month-long news headline comparison of a leading and respected corporate news source, CNN.com and a nonprofit news aggregator, Commondreams.org revealed some vast disparities in news coverage. Clearly, less coverage of trivial and celebrity stories will free up more time for covering news that informs and empowers an engaged citizenry.

CNN.com Headline Analysis

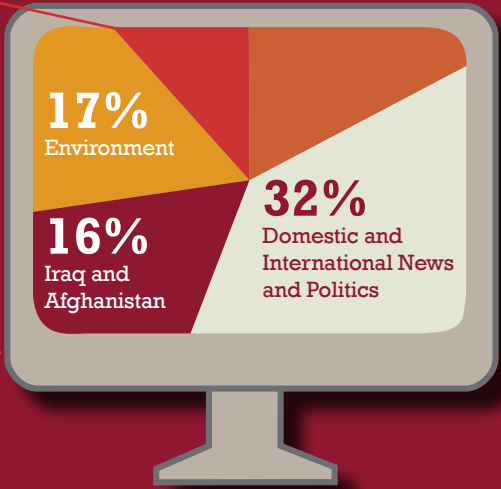
1%
Environment
3%
Iraq and
Afghanistan



(Tracked in September 2010 by SEE Innovation staff)

Common Dreams Headline Analysis

12%
Trivial,
violence,
death, crime,
celebrity,
scandal,
entertainment



from the editor

the facts. The Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism studied the media's coverage of the 2008 presidential election and found that most outlets covered the election like a sporting event. Pew found "horse race reporting, once again, made up the majority of coverage" and that rather than focus on the issues facing Americans, "53 percent of the coverage focused on political matters, particularly tactics, strategy and polling."¹

Studies also show a link between access to news and levels of political corruption at the national and state level. One 2008 MIT study found that members of Con-

gress who were covered less by the local press did less work for their local constituents, showed up to fewer hearings and brought less money back to their home districts.² Yet according to the Project for Excellence in Journalism, half the states no longer have a newspaper with a reporter covering the US Congress.³

What's Missing From the News?

More than 70 percent of Americans get their news from cable and network television,⁴ and how these outlets cover the big stories strongly influences who we

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Photo courtesy Ira Glass: This American Life

Ira Glass is the host of National Public Media's *This American Life* which explores a range of meaningful issues and stories of real people.

Larger and larger corporations—in fewer and fewer numbers—have taken control of more and more of our news organizations.

elect for public office, how we debate the most pressing issues of the day and when we go to war. Local television is still the number one source for news, but we don't often ask what we get in return for giving broadcasters those free but exclusive licenses to use the public airwaves.

Increasingly, we see the news ignore important issues and devote too much coverage to sensational and trivial stories. A recent study of Los Angeles television news by the University of Southern California found that in a typical half-hour newscast, half of the time was spent on ads and teasers. The remaining 15 minutes were dominated by crime stories, soft features, entertainment news, sports and weather. Just 22 seconds of the typical 30-minute news show was about local government.⁵

Media Ownership Matters

The biggest problem in journalism isn't poorly trained or unethical journalists. The real problem facing our media system is a structural one. Media owners influence

what news and information is covered, whether important issues are covered accurately, who is hired to report and produce the news, what music and artists get airplay and how women and minorities are portrayed in the media.

Larger and larger corporations—in fewer and fewer numbers—have taken control of more and more of our news organizations. They've merged, consolidated and concentrated into fewer and fewer hands, swallowing up local outlets. Before 1996, for instance, the biggest radio chain owned just a few dozen stations. Now Clear Channel owns nearly 1,000 and only a fifth of newspapers are independently owned. That runaway consolidation has left us with the same cookie-cutter content from coast to coast.

Media and tech companies have spent a billion dollars in the past decade to influence federal policy—even more than the oil and gas industry. Because

of their tremendous influence in Washington, media policymaking has been a closed and secretive process, and citizens have been shut out of the debate. So even though we own the airwaves, they decide how media is created, financed and distributed.

Public Policy for Public Media

What could things look like if policies were made to serve the public? Consider the current state of public broadcasting. National polls conducted in December 2009 and January 2010 found that Americans named PBS the most trusted, least biased, nationally known institution in the US.⁶ Yet compared to the rest of the world, we spend peanuts on public media. Americans now spend just a little more than \$400 million per year in public money on public media. That works out to just \$1.37 per person. By comparison, Canada spends \$22 per capita and England spends \$80.⁷

If the United States spent the same per capita on public media and journalism subsidies as Norway, which

If we want better media, we need better media policies. If we want better media policies, we need to raise public awareness about these issues and organize for real change.

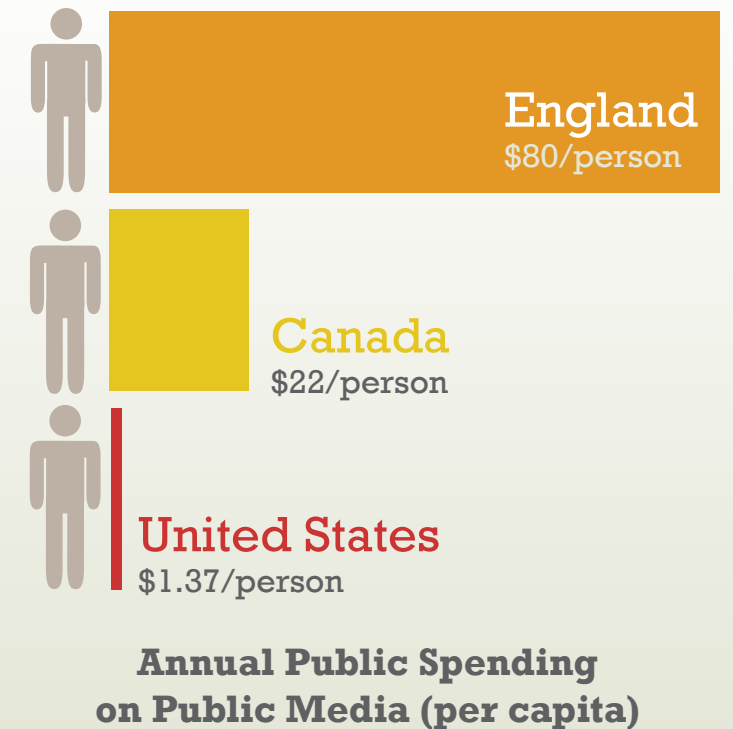
ranks number one, we would be spending as much as \$30 billion a year on public media—which would go a long way toward putting thousands of journalists back to work. Not coincidentally, countries that rank near the top in public media spending are also at the top of *The Economist* magazine's annual Democracy Index, which evaluates nations on the basis of the functioning of government, civic participation and civil liberties. In that same survey, the United States ranks 17th.⁸

At a moment when journalism is in crisis, we could re-imagine our current public broadcasting system and rebuild it as new public media with an overarching commitment to newsgathering and community service. We could put reporters back on their beats and remove commercial pressures from the newsroom. But getting better coverage of our communities starts with new policies and political change.

Charting Our Future

Fair and accurate news and information is necessary to guide an informed citizenry, and therefore the media is essential to our democracy. We depend upon media to know what's happening in our communities, to play our part as citizens and to serve as a vital check on government and corporate power.

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change. Now more than ever, people across the country need to be engaged in the debates about the future of our media. We need real people to have a seat at the table and a voice in those debates. By holding the media accountable for their content, supporting policies that encourage media diversity and participating in the media reform movement, real people can make coverage count.

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Craig Aaron is the president and CEO of Free Press (www.freepress.net), the national media reform group. He is the editor of two books, *Appeal to Reason: 25 Years In These Times* and *Changing Media: Public Interest Policies for the Digital Age*.



Focusing on Solutions



... Tess Croner,
Solutions
& Ida Kubiszewski,
Solutions and
Institute for Sustainable
Solutions, Portland State
University

Our journalists and politicians know how to talk about problems. Turn on the news, open the paper, and you'll find countless pieces dramatizing the many crises, local and global, that threaten to engulf us. As a result, we know about some of the challenges we face: climate change, unemployment, crime, terrorism, environmental degradation, substandard education and an energy crisis, to name a few. We know much less about potential solutions, however, especially those that go beyond narrow, technical fixes. And the less we know, the less likely we are to act, and the less able we will be to effect the change we need.

In a well-functioning democracy, citizens must have forums in which they can not only identify public problems and air public grievances, but also come together to discuss solutions. On a local level, some such forums still exist: in New England's town meetings, for instance, citizens still gather to compare and debate solutions to municipal problems. And in Britain and other European countries, the government ensures that a certain amount of television airtime is used for public education.¹ But in the US, on a national level, the public conversation is decidedly crisis-focused, with the majority of the media privately owned and profit driven.² As media outlets compete for ratings, and as reporters compete for scarce work, only those who can attract attention survive. The it-bleeds-it-leads approach may win ratings, but it contributes to public cynicism and fatigue.

In fact, studies have shown that TV news viewers leave the typical news program feeling anxious and depressed, and are much more likely to catastrophize personal worries.³ Other studies have found that reading negative newspaper articles can create

As media outlets compete for ratings, and as reporters compete for scarce work, only those who can attract attention survive. The it-bleeds-it-leads approach may win ratings, but it contributes to public cynicism and fatigue.

exaggerated feelings of distrust that extend beyond the content of the story.⁴

But with the massive growth of the blogosphere in recent years, media is changing. The Internet, unlike television, has no major technological or financial barriers to entry, and thus creates a more decentralized and two-directional communication structure. It gives users more control over the distribution of information and allows a message previously overseen by a few media corporations to be shaped by the entire population.

The Internet "allows citizens to gain knowledge about what is done in their name, just as politicians can find out more about those they claim to represent."⁵ It does more than just disseminate information; it lets voters talk back. It therefore creates new opportunities for communities to share stories and solutions, ranging from local to global, in ways that were once impossible. WiserEarth, a social networking site that helps people working toward social justice, indigenous rights and environmental stewardship connect, collaborate and share knowledge, has created a solutions directory accessible to all. This directory allows the public to share solutions from within their communities so they can be duplicated elsewhere in the world. The site features over 112,000 civil society organizations in 243 countries and territories.

Similar initiatives have sprung up in recent years. Dowser, a new media organization launched in 2010, reports on social innovation, using case studies and interviews to

address the question "Who is solving what and how?"; and the Good News Network posts daily about positive solutions-focused news from around the world. It also encourages authors and readers to collaborate to promote positive change. Says founder Geri Weis, "We need to be informed by a world view that is not dripping with sensationalism and attuned to the police scanner."⁶

Solutions is a hybrid academic journal/popular magazine, launched at the beginning of 2010, that showcases innovative ideas for solving the world's interconnected economic, environmental and political problems. The journal is designed to serve as a starting point for a more constructive and inclusive conversation—a new kind of town meeting in which academics, policy-makers and the informed public can discuss and explore solutions and develop shared visions of the future.

As a brief illustration of this new model of journalism, let's take a look at Appalachia. It's a special place—culturally rich and biologically diverse. But many of us associate it with the problems facing its poorest communities: unemployment, poverty and lagging education. Resource extraction, especially mountaintop removal mining—the practice of using explosives to remove the tops of the region's mountains to more easily reach coal deposits—has devastated both the environment and public health. The rubble is dumped into valleys where it chokes waterways. Native forests are destroyed, and mining wastes are responsible for polluting the groundwater. Tensions are rising between residents who oppose this practice and those whose livelihoods depend on coal mining.

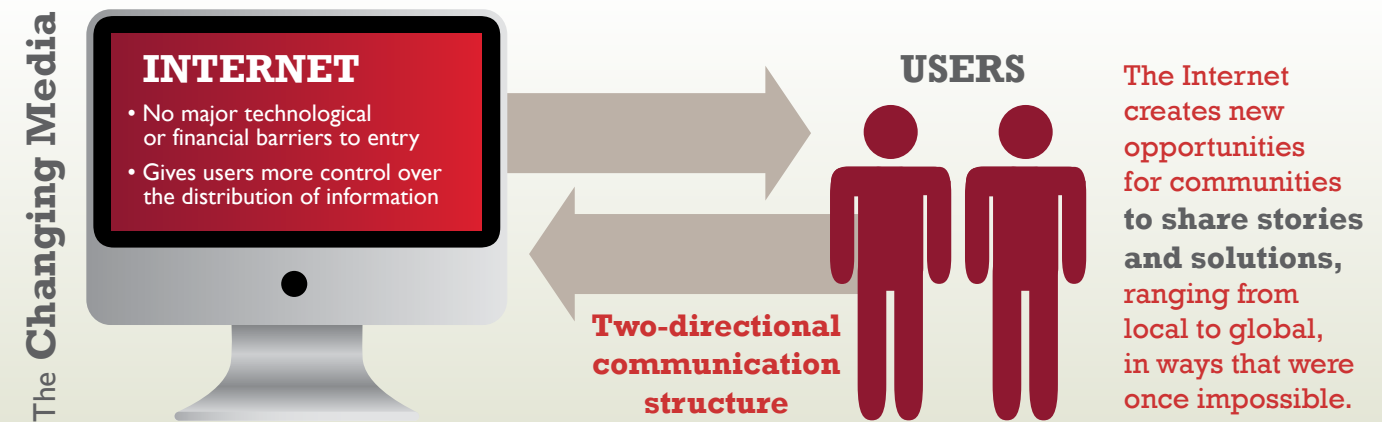




Photo courtesy The News Hour with Jim Lehrer
Jim Lehrer on the set of The News Hour on PBS. Americans named PBS the most trusted, least biased nationally known institution.



Photo courtesy US Force photo/Master Sgt. Stan Parker
Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Norton Schwartz answers questions during an interview with Lara Logan from 60 Minutes.

More Good News

For many people, independent media is the go-to place for fair and balanced news reporting. But independent media outlets aren't the only ones getting it right. More and more programs are popping up in the mainstream media that air compelling, useful news that's making a difference.

NBC News Education Nation

"Education Nation" was a weeklong national broadcast event with a focus on improving education in America. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, Harlem Children Zone's CEO Geoffrey Canada, along with other policymakers, educators, members of the business community, and engaged citizens came together for a two-day summit in Rockefeller Plaza to discuss America's education system. For the entire week a variety of NBC programs broadcast stories on the challenges, opportunities and success stories in education in the US with the goal of inspiring "lasting and positive improvements in our educational system."¹

CBS 60 Minutes

The investigative reporting news magazine program, *60 Minutes* does not simply regurgitate the facts. The program does its own investigations and follows up on investigations done by national newspapers and other sources. Many stories focus on allegations of wrongdoing and corruption on the part of corporations, politicians, and other public officials. The show also features celebrity biographies and profiles of people who have accomplished a heroic action or efforts to improve the world. In addition to informing the public, the program has influenced policy and exposed previously hidden truths.²

PBS NewsHour

Aired on public television, there are no commercials in this hour-long news program. After a brief summary of the headline, *PBS NewsHour* dives in to three or four of the headline events in-depth with 10 to 15 segments on each. The segments include discussions with experts, newsmakers, and/or commentators. Jim Lehrer, co-owner and anchor, created a unique list of 10 guidelines for ethical reporting including, "Cover, write, and present every story with the care I would want if the story were about me" and "Assume personal lives are a private matter until a legitimate turn in the story absolutely mandates otherwise."³

from the editor

This new trend in media is not a quest for cure-alls. Rather, it is an invitation to thoughtful conversation and collaborative consensus-building.

Coverage of the West Virginia mining tragedy only reinforced the region's troubled public image. But there is also a different conversation under way in Appalachia—a conversation that gets much less attention from conventional media. Many groups—private and public, local and regional—are working to create a new, more diverse and more sustainable local economy by reforesting barren mine lands, reclaiming rivers and streams, developing renewable energy industries and supporting the region's many entrepreneurs.

Solutions wanted to expand this conversation, include more voices and give it a wider regional and national audience. Its editors asked academics, activists and non-profit leaders who have spent their lives working to create solutions for Appalachia to help us imagine coal country's future beyond coal. The result was a special issue with 87 pages of ideas for a more prosperous, more sustainable Appalachia. In essence, it's a playbook for the region: a set of solutions that will focus and motivate future action.

Hearing about solutions can be empowering. And, critically, it can also be contagious: It can start conversations and inspire action. Michael Gleich, founder of the innovative German-based Advanced Journalism Academy, argues for the value, in a time of media sensationalism, of what he calls "constructive journalism." His organization has trained hundreds of journalists in conflicts areas, like Sri Lanka and Rwanda, to find and report on local peacemakers. His success has led

him to believe that there is a market for solutions-oriented journalism. Says Gleich, "I became aware that in all conflict areas known only for disaster and death there were intelligent, creative and courageous people working on peace processes. They seemed to be 'unknown heroes' because their stories were hardly covered by mainstream media." He adds, "Constructive journalism is an important additional viewpoint. It completes the picture."⁷

Johan Galtung founded TRANSCEND International, which, through the TRANSCEND media service, explores and supports the field of peace journalism. This field asks journalists to present the root causes of a conflict, give voice to all affected parties and report on ideas for conflict resolution as well as success stories and post-war developments. Galtung compares human conflicts to epidemics. If a disease were to break out in our country, we'd want our journalists to do more than simply tally the death count. We'd want them to offer a diagnosis, explain the causes of the outbreak and, most importantly, report on a cure. Says Galtung, "To say that violence is the only thing that sells is to insult humanity."⁸

Focusing on solutions does not mean ignoring problems or dismissing the obstacles that stand in the way of change. This new trend in media is not a quest for cure-alls. Rather, it is an invitation to thoughtful conversation and collaborative consensus-building. Both are essential steps toward effective action.

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Tess Croner is an editor for Solutions, a non-profit print and online journal that showcases innovative ideas for solving the world's integrated environmental, social and political problems. She graduated in 2009 with honors from Washington University in St. Louis, where she earned a BA in environmental studies with a minor in anthropology. She currently lives in Burlington, Vermont.

Dr. Ida Kubiszewski is a research assistant professor in the Institute for Sustainable Solutions at Portland State University. She is the Managing Editor of Solutions and a cofounder and former managing editor of the Encyclopedia of Earth. Dr. Kubiszewski is the author or coauthor of over 75 scientific papers and a Junior Fellow at the National Council for Science and the Environment.





Citizen Empowerment Through Journalism

• Sarah van Gelder
• YES! Magazine

What can we do as we face a perfect storm of climate crisis, joblessness, growing corporate power, and energy and food constraints? To take on these and the other crises of our times, we need journalism to rise to its fullest potential. High quality coverage of symptoms of the crises by responsible, mainstream journalists is important, but it isn't enough.

We need a new sort of journalism—let's call it constructive journalism. This is journalism that digs deeply and reveals the root causes of our problems. It also explores the emerging ideas and innovations that have the potential to shift our society in more just and sustainable directions. Constructive journalism shows that change is possible and highlights the role each person can play in bringing it about. This sort of journalism opens the door to real empowerment.

Shining the Light on Constructive Solutions

When people are losing their homes to foreclosure, constructive journalism shows that we have an alternative: community land trusts, which are experiencing almost no foreclosures among their modest-income homeowners. A reader of constructive journalism might learn about the Dudley Street Project in Boston, which succeeded in taking over large sections of abandoned inner-city land and transforming it into vibrant business districts and affordable housing.

Constructive journalism shows that change is possible and highlights the role each person can play in bringing it about. This sort of journalism opens the door to real empowerment.

Constructive journalism not only warns of the possible consequences of unchecked global warming; it tells stories of the activists who have prevented dozens of new coal plants from being built. And readers will learn that California voters averted attempts by big-spending out-of-state energy corporations to overturn the state's landmark climate law.

At a time when protracted wars are devastating people's lives, constructive journalism explores ways people are building understanding across divides, helping veterans and civilian victims of war to heal, and countering the powerful military-industrial complex.

Constructive journalism is not only about big issues. In addition to empowering us as citizens—this form of journalism explores ways to live more meaningful, joy-filled lives that don't compromise the well being of the Earth and its other residents.

One writer explores her own choice to live simply in order to have time at home with her children. Another writes of raising bees, and a third describes building a small, simple home to avoid the debt and clutter of living in a sprawling house. These writers are redefining happiness, not allowing their values to be dictated by commercialism.

These examples are just a few of the thousands of stories published in *YES! Magazine*. For 15 years, *YES! Magazine* has pioneered constructive journalism with quarterly themes ranging from local food to alternatives to prison, from DIY education to a new economy. Each issue explores the powerful ideas and practical actions that make change possible.

A Growing Movement

The movement toward constructive journalism has been picking up steam in recent years. This is not surprising given complaints that traditional journalism often leaves readers discouraged and without a way to respond to bad news.



What does constructive journalism do?

- Digs deep to reveal the root causes of our problems
- Explores ideas and innovations emerging to shift our society in more just and sustainable directions
- Shows that change is possible and highlights the role each individual can play in bringing it about



Photo courtesy Ashoka

Ashoka fellow Michael Gleich trains journalists to produce constructive coverage of social change.

With a background as a reporter, he has focused on the concept of constructive journalism, or news media that focuses on positive social change. That stands in contrast to the truism, “If it bleeds, it leads,” or the idea that violence and negative societal problems attract more readership and are easier to report.

Good magazine, founded in 2006, for example, describes itself as serving “the people, businesses, and NGOs moving the world forward.” Recent features include people doing polar bear plunges to raise money for the Maryland Special Olympics, and news of California’s first stretch of high-speed rail.

Greater Good magazine reports on the science of happiness and altruism, sharing research that improves quality of life and societal well being.

Even *The Nation* now features stories not only on the failings of the corporate-dominated economy, but also on the emergence of a new economy.

Building on the success of the print magazine, *YES!* is stepping up online coverage. New stories can be found daily on the *YES!* website, on the topics of peace and justice, planet, people power, new economy and happiness.

Some commentators mistake constructive journalism for feel-good fluff. But real constructive journalism doesn’t shy away from such difficult topics as the US prison system, which locks up more than 2 million Americans, or the mass extinction of species. But instead of stopping there, constructive journalism explores ways to address these tragedies at their roots, and features the people and stories that show the way. As mainstream news continues to evolve and change, we are

hopeful that it will incorporate more of the elements of constructive journalism.

Asking the Right Questions & Uncovering Practical Solutions

Instead of accepting without question the key assumptions that dominate popular media, constructive journalism holds them up to scrutiny. For example, most journalists assume that enhancing economic growth should be a principal aim of public policy—they question only how it might be accomplished. Constructive journalism asks whether economic growth can or should continue indefinitely given the resulting degradation of the natural systems on which human civilization depends. And it asks whether economic growth has, to date, enhanced human well being, or whether it’s done more to boost the wealth of the already fortunate at the expense of ordinary people.

In addition to empowering us as citizens, this form of journalism explores ways to live more meaningful, joy-filled lives that don’t compromise the well being of the Earth and its other residents.

“All of us who professionally use the mass media are the shapers of society. We can vulgarize that society. We can brutalize it. Or we can help lift it onto a higher level.”

➤ William Bernbach

Constructive journalism isn’t afraid to reframe issues, to allow a different story to emerge. Instead of asking how we can maximize economic growth, for example, we ask what policies and practices help ordinary people enjoy a sustainable livelihood that doesn’t undercut the Earth’s carrying capacity.

Constructive journalism rejects the stale left-right debate. The point isn’t to play on fear and anger to win followers by repeating, without fact checking, preposterous claims about “death panels” in the healthcare reform bill or the claims of climate change deniers. Scapegoating the least powerful members of society, or sensationalizing human failings may win audiences. But these practices undercut our ability to build a more just and sustainable society.

Instead of turning to the politicians and experts who have repeatedly failed to address our crises, constructive journalism looks to visionaries with ideas responsive to the deep challenges of our times. Those who are telling new stories about what’s possible are featured, along with those doing the hard work of building a new society. Readers meet people like former pro basketball player and corporate executive Will Allen, who runs a thriving urban farm, aquaculture operation and compost facility in Milwaukee, providing fresh food and dignified jobs to people who need both.

Constructive journalism delves into the interrelated and mutually reinforcing systems that threaten economic ruin and ecological collapse, and explores how these systems could be transformed to contribute instead to lasting human and ecological well-being. Local, sustainable food, for example, will probably not

be a big story for journalists focused on Wall Street speculation. But in terms of the real economy of people and the planet, it’s a winner; it offers more jobs, reduces the distance our food travels, sequesters carbon in the soil, and cuts the massive application of chemicals. It reduces the power of agribusiness, oil, and chemical corporations, and distributes economic and political power instead of concentrating it in a few hands. And it uses less fossil fuel, so it helps extend the life of our current oil supplies.

These sorts of whole-systems solutions are neither liberal nor conservative. They are the way to build a world in which we honor and preserve life.

Constructive journalism goes to the very root of our role as individuals, and as members of families, communities, and cultures. It challenges us to do more than sit back and complain when things go wrong; it asks that each of us consider our own role in fixing our troubled world. Instead of seeing ourselves as the victims of wrongs, we are invited to be agents of history.

Our world is at a turning point. Of thousands of human generations, ours is the one that will determine if future generations will inhabit a livable world. Constructive journalism is one of the tools we can draw on to make change a living reality.

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Sarah van Gelder is a co-founder and executive editor of YES! Magazine (www.yesmagazine.org), a national media organization that combines powerful ideas with practical action for a more just and sustainable world.

