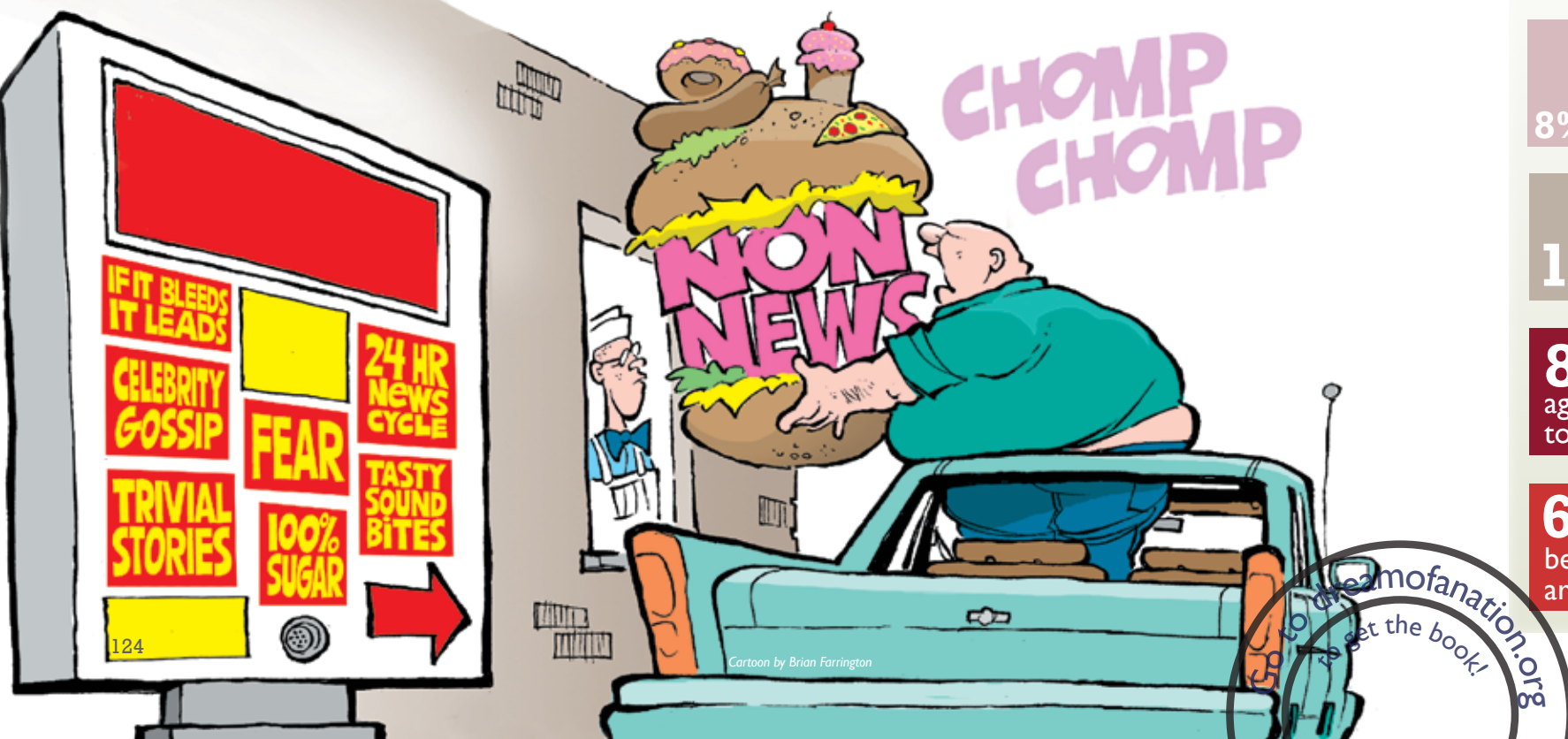


Media: A Tool for Strengthening Democracy

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

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

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

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 Independent 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 Independent* 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.

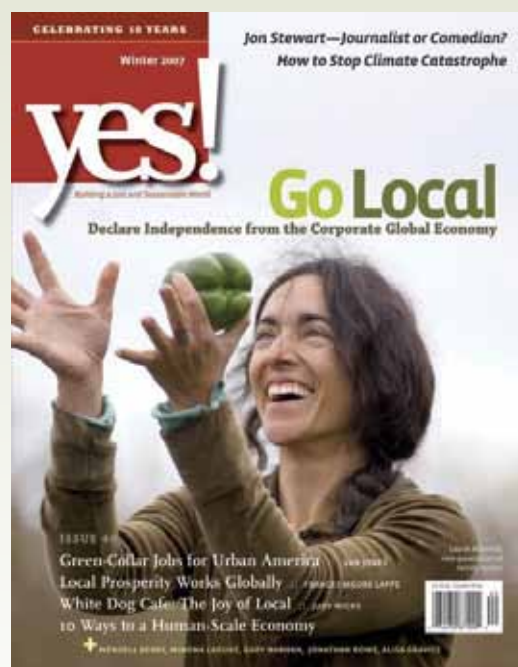
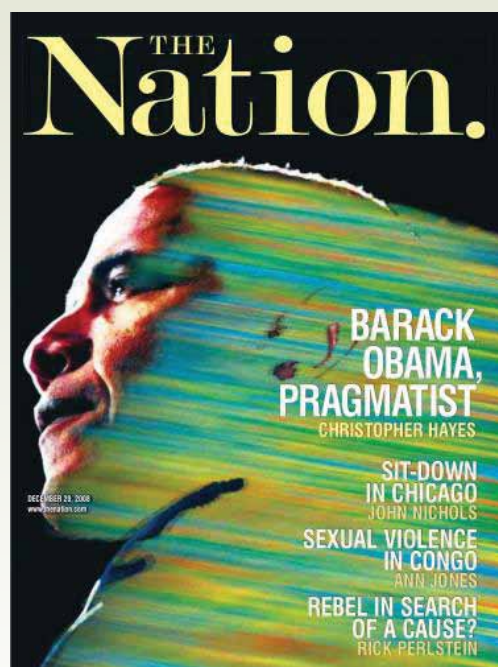
2 Encourage mainstream media to do better.

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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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.



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.

