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Media Democracy Day

Paul Baines

Paul Baines is an anti-oppression activist using media literacy as a tool for education and organizing. Paul has a Masters degree in critical pedagogy and media education and is always looking for paid work in this area. He lives in a collective household in Toronto and is a support worker for a disabled man.

After organizing Media Democracy Day events for three years, I have mixed opinions about my future involvement. In the summer of 2001, a handful of Toronto media activists started planning for a new fall event. October 18th would promote "a mass media system that informs and empowers all members of society." Our Web site (www.mediademocracyday.org) continues on with Media Democracy Day connecting existing critical and creative media with active social movements, creating a coherent message for public attention and local and global action. Media Democracy Day is a day of international action based on three themes: 1) Education—understanding how the media shapes our world and our democracy; 2) Protest—against a media system based on commercialization and exclusiveness; and 3) Change—calls for media reforms that respond to public interests, promote diversity, and ensure community representation and accountability.

Being involved in writing, researching, and advocating about media democracy issues such as community access and excessive commercialism for ten years, I felt confident enough to work with a small yet inspired group of Toronto media activists on the MDD campaign. In many respects our work was trying to ask the question: how do we make the mass media more democratic and promote literacy and alternatives? To a point the issues seemed obvious, as common sense and even rational. A democratic society should have

a democratic media system because the media play a large role in the public's understanding of political issues and choices. Answering our own question, we crafted a Web site and connected with a range of media democracy examples. We had small but spirited demonstrations outside media conglomerate offices and organized discussion panels and socials to share strategies and perspectives. We made handbills, web reports, culture jams and spoke directly to teachers, reporters, media employees, students, and artists. The Toronto activists started something that went global in over 20 cities in its second year and continues to spark interest (the Web site above has fuller descriptions of the events).

My satisfaction with the campaign fades when I think about who is speaking for whom, what issues are brought into focus, and which ones are being obscured. Through my organizing and education, I now see oppressive framing or assumptions in the media democracy movement and want to start a dialogue. The term "Media Justice" has recently made an entry into the discussion, yet I struggle making a coherent contribution. What follows is my first attempt.

Our North American media system is undemocratic because our society is undemocratic. The state of our media is an extension of an oppressive nationalist-corporate state. It's not a problem to be fixed within the system, but a lesson in how the system works. There hasn't been democracy in Canada or the United States for as long as these countries started enclosing their boundaries. Progressives, leftists, democrats, or activists who lament about the loss of democracy are sharing a colonial his-story of the world written by a vicious and victorious elite. The question shouldn't be: How do CNN and the CBC support neo-liberal agendas, but what can be learned from their connection to other historical examples of white-supremacist, capitalist, and patriarchal cultural institutions? The difference between tradition and the present lays not so much in what their role is, but who is now affected. Marginalized groups such as women, people of color, First Nations, gays, children, jailed men and women, mental health survivors, the poor, non-Christian, non-citizens, non-schooled and those with different physical abilities from the majority, have always been absent from establishment history and mass media narratives. The real reason why media democracy is now an issue is because corporate regulation through corporate democracy is starting

to affect certain freedoms enjoyed by a powerful minority (i.e. a reverse list of the one above).

I support media reform, even radical reform as long as it makes social justice its starting point and not de-contextualized red herrings such as de-regulation, commercialism, foreign ownership, public access, alternative media, and content diversity. These terms can be useful if used with precision and persistence towards justice and anti-oppression rather than with the hollow ideals of Western democracy that never existed for the majority of people.

I want to continue my work as a media activist but I struggle with defining or building a coalition when so much of the discourse obscures fundamental injustices. Privilege and oppression work in tandem, and if a media reform coalition is being built, I need to ask fundamental questions about my assumptions to know where I stand and who I stand with. Is the media being de-regulated? Policies can support a democratic media system for social justice or they can serve elite nationalist-corporate interests. Only through propaganda have these interests convinced people that public interest policy is regulation and that elite interest policy is, you name it: open markets, fair competition, the free hand, convergence, common sense, the natural order, etc.

The problem isn't de-regulation but regulation for elite control and profit. We've got to get this message out. The government isn't becoming less powerful or being bought out by big money, the government is big money using public policy to reward itself and its partners. Who should pay for democratic media, the public or the private sector? Commercial media, just like public media, is not free. Consumers pay for commercialism through the costs of advertising (5.5 billion in Canada and 150 billion in the U.S.) added on to the price of goods and services, and citizens pay for commercialism through the costs of pollution, working longer hours to buy more stuff, personal debt, and social service taxes. People pay for everything. Deals for increased corporate media consolidation with public interest spin-offs are a scam.

The problem isn't how do we balance public and private needs, but what system serves people first and how do we build and pay for it. How can commercialism colonize our culture (as some say its doing) when our culture is already an instrument of colonization? It's no coincidence that our models of democracy are learned from sexist-

slave-owning Greece rather than First Nation band councils and tribe federations. It's fascinating that progressive academics or anti-globalization activists can see consumerism as a virus attacking the host culture, yet obscure the past and present violence of that culture toward the indigenous people of North America and African slaves and their descendants. How is Disney different from Christianity? Stock markets from slave trading? Marketing demographics from Euro-American nation building?

Our understanding of capitalism needs analytical dimensions beyond class or commodification. Production and consumption are equally about gender and race. Without stolen land or forced and unpaid labor, there would be no capitalist North American economy to speak of. We need an anti-oppressive perspective that examines the interlocking forces of power otherwise we continue to obscure the violent lessons of history. As a Canadian, would I rather watch Canadian commercialism or American critical consciousness? Within a multi-dimensional perspective on democracy or commercialism, debates over foreign ownership seem ridiculous. Rogers or Sprint? Bell or AT&T? My solidarity sticks with the rights and needs of marginalized groups, not corporate citizenship. Whether the millions of dollars a media conglomerate steals from the public's airwaves go to a Canadian or American company or shareholder I don't care. Canadian culture industry jobs vs. American jobs? French, English, or Spanish, sound bites? Ottawa's or Washington's tax- bases? These debates don't interest me since the borders that separate us (and keep out millions of others who can't afford citizenship) are secondary to the task of social justice.

If democracy is about having a say in the decisions that affect your life, then every Canadian would have a vote in the U.S. presidency or in the stock market for that matter. But we don't. My kind of democracy isn't about making the poor of Canada richer than the poor of the United States or any other state. This interplay between democracy and justice needs to be seriously considered. In a democratic media system, what do people have access to; with who are they equal, and from what standard is diversity measured? In my Media Democracy Day organizing I talked a lot about access, equality, and diversity, but I helped maintain the invisible hierarchical social relations that make up our society. Through my readings in anti-oppression and environmental justice, I now see that each of

these terms needs to be examined and applied to this new media justice framework. People are not all the same nor need or deserve the same things based on their individuality and systemic levels of cultural, political, and economic power. Access to the airwaves is important, but without access to financial, legal, technical, and political resources or to a sizable audience, access is impotent. Plus, if access is only access to the existing structure of media injustice its value falls again. When equality and diversity are championed by activists, let's be clear about the invisible level or center we are talking about. If this measure is based on the privileged proximity to a middle-class, white, male ideal, doesn't this mask the unequal relations that caused the power difference in the first place?

The ideal should not be seen as the marker of progress, but the agent of injustice and target of transformation. Does an alternative media system just change the type of product consumed, and does it change the process of making and using the media? While I wish there were more choices of critical media products, I don't see media democracy as an act of critical consumption. Three white guys uploading digital photos of a mostly white demonstration on their \$3,000 laptop isn't alternative. Reading best selling books don't necessarily lead to action. Even the best critical consciousness media need time, space, and tools for connecting with people's political reality. What are the issues being presented in the media? What's my response? How can I demonstrate my new ideas? What support do I need? Who else is feeling and thinking the same thing?

I know community television in Canada has been reduced to community relations, but I still believe that the transformative potential of people making media, becoming the storytellers of their own lives, is central to democratizing the media. Not only does this add grassroots diversity, but also the act of making one piece of media demystifies the gear, gaze, and glamour of modern media. I wish I had more strategic and constructive answers to my questions, but for now, this is all I have. My reading of history tells me that movements of good intention are not enough to lead us toward greater democracy or justice. The Media Justice conference (www.mediajustice.org) last summer renewed my interest in media activism and comments on this article are welcomed at pjbaines@yahoo.ca. This contribution is brief and direct because I want to invite as much interpretation and feedback as possible.