

A Note from the Independent Press Association

Where are the social movements of the twenty-first century? I posed this question to Bob Ostertag (or maybe he posed it to me) during an intense and provocative discussion we held late one Friday afternoon in a historic San Francisco bar—the kind of place where the city’s journalists, politicians, and rabble-rousers have been gathering for the last hundred years or so to debate the issues of the day. As the din surrounded us, we hit upon a critical point: Social movements as we have known them, and the social movement press as we have come to expect it to function and engage with the public, are changing in ways one may not immediately recognize.

It’s a remarkable fact that one of the most prominent social movements to emerge in this new century is the media reform movement itself. In 2003, twenty years after Ben Bagdikian published his groundbreaking but much-ignored book *The Media Monopoly*, millions of citizens bombarded the halls of government to protest the Federal Communication Commission’s decision to radically lower the barriers to corporate media consolidation. That seemingly spontaneous protest succeeded, and two years later, Free Press, an organization founded by prominent media critic Robert McChesney and responsible for much of the grass-roots organizing

that led to that victory, brought more than twenty-five hundred media reform activists together for a national convention to celebrate the movement's success and to chart its future.

As Bob Ostertag notes in his introduction, corporate media consolidation has emerged as one of the most socially corrosive forces we face today. It has robbed local communities of their voice in national public affairs, and it has turned debate over complex national issues into a shouting match over deliberately polarized views. The result is a dichotomy only George Orwell could have predicted: The majority—those who nominally have a voice in local and national civic affairs—have come increasingly to view the public stage as a reality TV set, where they have a ticket to watch but not to take part; and the minority—those for whom American civic society is daily held up as a promise in mainstream newspapers, magazines, books, movies, TV shows, and Web sites—find themselves standing off-stage, portrayed as actors in a drama they could never have imagined on their own.

Whereas there have been moments in the past, however brief, when social movements could leverage mainstream media to echo and amplify their successes in grass-roots organizing, today's social movements face the uncomfortable fact that mainstream, corporate media are overwhelmingly indifferent to complex social debate. Bagdikian anticipated this outcome: "The result of the overwhelming power of relatively narrow corporate ideologies has been the creation of widely established political and economic illusions in the United States with little visible contradiction in the media to which a majority of the population is exclusively exposed" (*Media Monopoly*, 6th ed., p. 44).

Hence the need for media reform of a kind not envisioned in the 1980s, when Bagdikian first stated his case, and certainly not in recent years, when the profusion of Internet content has seemed to make media reform an idea whose time has come—and gone. Today's media reform movement is characterized by a growing recognition that a strong, diversified, professional, and independent press is a critically needed factor in the contemporary media en-

vironment, essentially replacing mainstream, corporate media in the role of echoing the insights of social movements to the larger society and creating the conditions under which social activism is possible.

This book is a tribute to the vision of the Independent Press Association's (IPA) founders, and especially its founding executive director, John Anner, who in 1996 launched the organization specifically to support the emergence of independent publishing as a powerful new force on the media and social movement scenes. In 2002, at the suggestion of the New World Foundation's president Colin Greer, Anner enlisted Bob Ostertag to write a brief narrative on the history of the social movement press in order to document its central influence in bringing about the great social advancements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which we now take for granted. With encouragement, advice, and generous support from Dayna Cunningham and Andre Oliver of the Rockefeller Foundation, Anner and Ostertag expanded the initial manuscript into the full-length book you hold in your hands. The IPA's Jeremy Smith shepherded the manuscript through a critical period of gestation; and Joanne Wyckoff and Brian Halley of Beacon Press recognized the significance of this work and brought it to completion. To all these people—especially to Bob Ostertag and our colleagues at the Rockefeller Foundation—we owe a debt of gratitude.

RICHARD LANDRY

Executive Director

Independent Press Association