

America's Media in Crisis: The Battle Over The Future of Journalism

America's largest media reform organization commemorated ten years of a media war but other forces are at work to undercut their efforts

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Region: [USA](#)

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I was among the many media wannabe reformers to attend the tenth anniversary party of Free Press, (freepress.net) the mostly online organization and lobby that promotes itself as a movement to transform our media system, and save our democracy.

I certainly support their policy goals like net neutrality and curbs on media consolidation, and also admire their staying power, even if their style is very upwardly mobile, and rather un-left like, starting with this trendy soiree in an ultra modern upscale hotel lounge where drinks went for \$15.00.

Free Press has been very effective in raising large sums of money using top-down means of organizing support. (To be honest, as the editor of Mediachannel.org, a site that is barely holding on, I am a bit jealous of their evident skills as fundraisers and organization builders.)

I would like to see them do more to encourage other progressive groups to do more than electoral politics and take on media issues

I had been troubled by a lack of follow-up at their earlier media reform conferences and on-line petition orientation, but I have to admit, at the same time, few other groups have taken on these issues so persistently, and can claim 165,000 supporters.

What I have also admire is the support they have attracted by the likes of Bill Moyers who has spoken at, and even helped fund their events. Moyers is an eloquent and outspoken advocate for the importance of journalism as a guardian of democracy. (Disclosure, he praised my new book, Madiba A-Z on Nelson Mandela as part of his speech at the event and even wrote a blurb for it.)

I haven't seen any press reports about the Free Press celebration, other than the one I blogged. I also reported on their earnest and outspoken advocates I admire, folks like Media historian Robert McChesney, Nation editor John Nichols and CEO Craig Aaron.

Aaron's speech was very media critical.

This party didn't form a Party. In fact, it rapidly turned from a call to arms, to a call for alms, with fundraising envelopes everywhere, and wealthy donors announcing impressive donations.

Their message doesn't get much bounce in the media that has more bottom line concerns to worry about. Most of the mainstream or 'lame stream' media are loathe to critique themselves or let others do it in their "space." Try to get the New York Times To print a letter criticizing the New York Times, and you will see what I mean.

No one at the Free Press event mentioned the recent flawed Benghazi story on 60 Minutes that the network was then defending until they suddenly caved on Friday, and announced they will apologize for it.

It was another "scoop" by chief correspondent Lara Logan who never saw a US military escalation she disapproved of. It was her story but rather than admit her own culpability, she issued and delivered statements about how "WE"—ie. the CBS News Division will correct it,

Even as Lara was deflecting criticism from herself, another prominent media maven, publisher Tina Brown, was in India denouncing journalism itself, after reportedly losing \$60 million dollars running Newsweek and the Daily Beast.

Speaking at the THiNK conference, in of all places, a resort in Goa, the media executive who has generated more press for herself than any of her stories, has now decided, get this, journalism is over.

The Wrap, the new entertainment website reports: "Tina Brown, outgoing editor of the Daily Beast and former editor of the New Yorker, Vanity Fair and Newsweek, doesn't even read magazines anymore — nor does she think too highly of journalism at all.

Brown told the audience of a THiNK conference in Goa, India on Friday that she is basically done with journalism, which she said is currently having a "very, very pathetic moment" and has turned to advertising in order to try to make a profit."

Brown, once a fan of telling, seems now totally into selling, adding, "The digital explosion has been so explosive. There isn't a single place where the digital thing is a profit thing. The disruption hasn't brought a business model."

She has also put down TV where she flopped, on a show on CNBC I briefly worked on, but wasn't really listened to. Her latest pronouncement: "TV is dead and now they are chasing a demographic they are never going to find."

To her, television is now "an ugly piece of furniture."

She will soon be putting the best face on her up and down career with a memoir called "Beast" where she will give her side on a number of earlier financial disasters including the ill-fated magazine Talk that she produced with film producer Harvey Weinstein.

Those of us of the Free Press persuasion look at the financial interests behind the media and try to expose them, while people in the media want to bring those financial interests into their bank accounts.

The insiders are more consumed by the lifestyles and scandals of the rich and infamous mogul class, the gods and goddesses of consumerism and consciousness, who talk a lot about providing content but offer little in the way of context.

Outsiders denounce the profit focus of the media as at odds with the press's role as beacon of truth. Insiders, denounce it now because it isn't profitable enough.

Moyers, a hero of public media has just about had it with public television as has the incisive reporter Ray Suarez who labored at NPR and on the PBS News Hour for what seemed like decades before becoming too disgusted to persevere.

He is now going to Aljazeera America (AJAM).

And Free Press? The day after the night before, CEO and former journalist Craig Aaron, emboldened by the enthusiasm at the event, sent out an email pledging a continuing campaign

"We're eager to share our vision to build the bigger and bolder movement we need to win. Free Press is ready to lead that movement and to fight for your rights to connect and communicate.

The path we choose now will decide whether we have an open and uncensored Internet; whether we restore privacy; whether we support serious journalism; whether we still have a say in our democracy."

That's all to the good, but it's not just the government or the FCC or the NSA that threatens a free press.

The huge media companies are not only complicit but continue to self-censor, and sanitize news often deliberately refusing to report truthfully.

Yes, we have to fight to be able to "connect and communicate"—but also to work for a media system that strengthens our democracy. That will require a willingness to press the press.

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