

Under the noses of the censors

IN 1991 the tiny nation of East Timor was occupied by a brutal Indonesian military that had murdered one third of the Timorese population during the preceding decade and a half. And almost no one cared. East Timor had no strategic importance. And it had no valuable resources.

Indonesia, on the other hand, was an important strategic ally of the United States, first during the cold war, and more recently in the so-called war on terror. Hence, successive US administrations dating back to Jimmy Carter's days not only turned a blind eye to Indonesia's atrocities in East Timor – they compliantly armed and trained the brutal Indonesian military as it used its US-made weapons to pillage East Timor. The American mass media also turned a blind eye toward East Timor, ultimately ignoring the Timorese carnage for two decades.

I can't, however, say that no one cared. Human rights activists around the world kept trumpeting the cry of genocide – and a handful of alternative press reporters kept the story alive. Pacifica Radio's Amy Goodman was one of them. In 1991 she traveled to East Timor, and along with Pacifica's Allen Nairn, saw the Indonesian military massacre 270 East Timorese people.

In an attempt to silence her, the Indonesians beat both her and Nairn, who was hospitalized with a fractured skull. Goodman and Nairn, however, got the story out, winning the Robert F. Kennedy Prize for International Reporting, the Alfred I. DuPont-Columbia Silver Baton, the Armstrong Award, the Radio/Television News Directors Award, and well as slew of other journalistic accolades.

In 1999, under the threat of even more violence from Indonesia, the East Timorese held a referendum, overwhelmingly calling for an Indonesian withdrawal from their nation. Upon losing the election, the Indonesian military burned most of East Timor. Again, Amy

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Goodman kept the story alive on Pacifica's Democracy Now radio news program.

In 2002, thanks to pressure from the international community and a handful of journalists who wouldn't let the story die, East Timor finally won its independence from Indonesia. On May 20th, Amy Goodman joined representative of 92 countries – including an apologetic former president, Bill Clinton – for East Timor's first independence celebration.

Not Bill Clinton's kind of woman

Her reporting on East Timor earned her the title, "a threat to [Indonesian] national security," doled out by the Indonesian military. Bill Clinton, who allowed the Indonesians to plumbage East Timor for eight years under his watch, reacted to Goodman's persistently tough questioning of his policy, by terming her "hostile, combative, and even disrespectful." To the free democratic nation of East Timor, however, she is a hero.

Crossing the line from journalist to hero is rather routine for Goodman, who braved Nigeria's murderous dictatorship in 1996 to bring her listeners the story of Chevron Oil's role in the murder of environmental activists in that country. Her efforts won her a Project Censored Award as well as the George Polk Award and the Golden Reel for Best National Documentary from the National Federation of Community Broadcasters.

Earlier this year, Goodman again crossed the line, breaking the story of the US orchestrated coup in Haiti. When US Marines went to the Presidential Palace and physically removed that Country's elected president, Jean Bertrand Aristide, from office, Goodman went into war mode, working around the clock to bring the true story of the coup to her listeners. With President Aristide still MIA, Goodman was already on the air, bringing eyewitness accounts of his capture to the American people.

Ultimately, she flew in a chartered jet with US Representative Maxine Waters to the Central African Republic, where Aristide was being held under unofficial house arrest at the direction of US and French officials. Goodman, equipped with a satellite telephone, reported for a tense seven hours as Waters negotiated Aristide's release. Since nobody in the Central African Republic would go on the record saying Aristide was their prisoner, he finally left that country on the small jet with Waters, Goodman and their entourage flying to Jamaica. Goodman not only broke the story of the Haitian coup, but she kept it alive as the mainstream US media arduously ignored it. Her coverage of the Haitian story scored over 3.5 million hits on Democracy Now's website, ultimately forcing the story into the mainstream press in what Goodman describes as "trickle-up" journalism.

Since Democracy Now's debut in 1996, this kind of journalism has earned Goodman and the program a growing following. The show, which originally aired on only a handful of

Pacifica Radio stations, can now be heard and seen on over 225 community television and public radio stations around the US – a number that grows by the month as more and more people seek out alternatives to corporate controlled news and propaganda.

A threatening woman on tour

And it's not just the show that's coming to audiences around the country – it's Goodman herself, who has embarked on a 70 city tour to promote both Democracy Now and her new book, "The Exception to the Rulers." Newsweek interviewed Goodman two weeks ago, catching up with her in St. Louis, where she was in town to speak both at a Moveon.org fundraiser and at the Union for Democratic Communications (UDC) Conference.

The Newsweek interview begins with a typically annoying opening, "Depending on your own brand of politics, you either view Amy Goodman as a crusader, a kook, a nuisance, a threat, or a hero. But one thing is almost irrefutable: she has courage." I'll take their words one at a time. Crusader? No. She's not marching over nations in an ethnocidal military charge under a religious banner. What an imprecisely silly use of language, even as a rhetorical question. Goodman is the antithesis of a crusader. Kook? She's certainly no kook. Nuisance? Sure. And a threat as well – to anyone who fears the truth and works to repress it. Hero? It depends who you are. If I.F. Stone and George Seldes are your heroes, than she should be, too – as one of the few people on the radio today who remembers what a journalist is and what responsibilities go along with that title.

Goodman posed a rhetorical question to Newsweek, asking why, with so many mainstream journalists throwing their hands up in the air and asking how they got the weapons of mass destruction story wrong, won't they invite someone into their studios who got the story right – someone who "questioned the credibility [of the intelligence about Iraq] more than a year ago?" Goodman hosted a slew of credible sources before the war, who turned out to be right, but were marginalized by the corporate press. Without the American public hearing their voices, we went to war.

A vegan having Fox for breakfast

I also caught up with Amy Goodman in St. Louis. I planned on hearing her speak at the UDC conference at 8:30 AM. At about 8:00, however, I became intrigued by the colorful little card in my hotel room that threatened me with Fox News. I pushed a few buttons on a remote control and on popped the TV, complete with a teaser promising Amy Goodman on Fox's local News. So I waited. At about 8:15, Fox's anchor, looking like a refugee from a 1980s hairspray commercial, welcomed Amy Goodman on the air.

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Considering that she was doing her Democracy Now program live from St. Louis at 7:00 AM Central Time, she must have just gotten off of the air herself and rushed over to the Fox studio.

The Fox anchor asked her about the issue of the day – the photos of flag-draped coffins that Fox itself had decided to censor. "Isn't it in bad taste? Won't showing these photos disturb people who are eating dinner?" "Yes, it's in bad taste," Goodman responded, "But war is in bad taste. War disturbs people." The Fox anchor's face literally began to twitch. Goodman later explained that the Fox affiliate, seeing the opportunity to interview a visiting celebrity, had carved out three minutes of the on-air interview time. After 15 seconds the anchor realized that this was a mistake, but his teleprompter remained blank, with two minutes and forty-five seconds still ticking away. Goodman explained that maybe, with the nation at war, people needed to have their dinner disturbed – that the families of many American service personnel stationed in Iraq were having their dinners disturbed — that Iraqi families were having their dinner disturbed as well.

The Fox anchor argued, "What if we showed those photos during World War Two? Hitler would have won!" Goodman explained that we did show such photos during World War Two. I guess in the world of broadcast television, asking a stupid pointed question is objective, but answering such a question shows a bias. For me, the three minutes flew by quickly as Goodman kept responding to the anchor's inane questions with dynamic informative comebacks. Perhaps those three minutes contained more international news than an average viewer would get watching Fox for days. For the anchor, though, the seconds must have dragged by ever so slowly. Intellectually, it was like Mike Tyson boxing against a jockey – with Tyson packing a machete. I almost felt compassion for the mindless anchor. But I didn't. Thousands of people are dying because of people like this Fox anchor abdicating their responsibilities as supposed journalists. On the air next to a real journalist, how could he look like anything other than a weasel.

I turned off the TV and rushed over to the conference which was being hosted in a large Unitarian Church. I got there at 8:30, in time to find Goodman, cellphone stuck to her head, grazing the cafeteria for vegan fare. This is Goodman's life. Wake up in a strange town. Host your own radio/TV show live from a local studio. Make fools of the local Fox News homeboys before breakfast. Find some vegan chow in the basement of a Unitarian Church. Give a one hour talk to a bunch of media scholars and field a few questions. Sign books. Chat with professors and journalists. Work the phones setting up tomorrow's news. Drive to Champaign, Illinois. Deliver another speech. Field more questions. Meet more people. Sign more books. Wake up the next morning and do it all over, first the live radio show, then go to Yellow Springs, Ohio, give a talk, sign books, then off to

Minneapolis before dark to give a speech, sign books, set up the next day's show – staying perky all the way, missing no beat.

Extremist media's big lie

What she is getting tired of is corporate media pundits across the country asking her the same worn-out questions, asserting that American media has a "liberal bias." She says the question is "so boring." In city after city, she asks her hosts to "show me the facts." The liberal bias line is what Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels called, "the big lie" – repeat it long enough and people think it's true. Goodman's style is to counter such lies, not with the windbag rhetoric of talk radio, but with hard research and facts. In St. Louis she was citing a study conducted by Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, showing that of 393 interviews conducted by CBS, NBC, ABC and PBS's News Hour during the month leading up to last year's invasion of Iraq, only three were with anti-war voices. That's a ratio of almost 120 to one.

The war, Goodman argues, was never popular – hence the hard sell by a corporate media acting in subservience to the Bush clan. She explained that there's a "dirty little secret, which is really a beautiful reality," that being the fact that if the media reflected the true opinions of people in the US instead of opinions of corporate and government elites, we would know that we are not in the minority. This is the function of Democracy Now – to not only inform Americans, but to remind us that ethical caring people are still a majority.

To this end, Goodman suggests we stop referring to the corporate media as "mainstream media." They don't reflect the mainstream. They are subservient to a radical reactionary political agenda out of touch with mainstream Americans. Hence, she suggests, we should simply refer to them as "extremist media," who she describes as a bunch of "know nothings" who seem to parrot an identical line from city to city, with only the studio backdrops changing behind them.

The omnipresence of mind-numbing "extremist" media is also the driving force behind the popularity of Democracy Now and the unprecedented alternative media explosion this country is currently experiencing. This new alternative media revolution began, she explains, in Seattle in 1999 at the WTO protests, when the online Independent Media Center scored more hits than CNN. People can see the mainstream media for what it is and have started looking for an alternative. That's why National Public Radio stations across the country have started airing Democracy Now, Free Speech Radio News, Radio Nation, Counterspin, TUC Radio and a host of other programs struggling to revive the American tradition of journalism questioning the dominant political paradigm.