

Rebellious Media Conference Review (8th and 9th October 2011)

<http://rebelliousmediaconference.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/RMC-Printed-Programme-web.pdf> (for full details of workshops and speakers...)

The Institute of Education on the Saturday and the Friends Meeting House on the Sunday via Euston underground. Every ticket sold. Keynote speaker Noam Chomsky. Networking and information exchanges with many like minded people. Stewards wearing T shirts with a huge attendee demand but no supply. Numerous workshops and discussion opportunities. Why doesn't every community offer this? Now there is an idea!

Everyone takes something away from this inspiration even if it just a leaflet. I took away the following. Rebellion must have a specific idea of what it is and what it wants. It must not set itself unattainable goals that lead many to give up when the early defeats become representative. Every point in the journey should be celebrated whether it is a victory or a defeat. Every outcome is valuable, leading to different starting points and new challenges. There is no end just a wondrous desire to keep making things better.

Once we all accept this then each discrete rebellion will be filled with glory no matter the outcome. Wondrous!

Keynote Session: Radical Media, Radical Priorities



Noam Chomsky (Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies, Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media) was introduced by

Michael Albert (coordinator of one of the world's largest radical websites, ZNet). The ethos that I extrapolated from the weekend was set by these two hours. Yes we live in a world that contains multiple negatives but there are also many positives and many more positives to come as long as we rebel both as individuals and in every other form of human collectivism. An example that Noam Chomsky gave is the Iraq War. He argued that the outcome of the invasion of Iraq would have been much more catastrophic if the people had not demonstrated on the streets and maintained a prolific anti war sentiment. Blair & Bush were contained by our strength of feeling and we only have to compare this conflict with Vietnam to understand what Kennedy and Johnson got away with and how that region suffered as a result.

He then recapped on the history that led to the New Deal, under Roosevelt, and the Civil Rights movement and reminded us that neither simply just happened but occurred because of praxis and movements of parts of the population (as per Hegelian dialectics and Marxism's historical materialism) that pressurized, if not for radical economic change then, significant cultural momentum. This is true now in both Egypt and Tunisia and their long history of militant labour movements is largely ignored by our mainstream media. I cannot think why. The April 6th Movement (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/revolution-in-cairo/inside-april6-movement/>) should be common knowledge but it is barely reported.

During the two hour introduction and question & answer session Chomsky covered many national and international issues. The following are my highlights.

A question was asked about why consecutive US governments had allowed the **Detroit car industry** to decline so dramatically. Although this has to be contextualised within the recent economic recovery plan of the Obama administration, Chomsky highlighted how the corporations were the ultimate power brokers. He cited an example of how a group of workers, threatened with redundancy, had put together a package to save their factory. Even though this same factory was making a profit it was not perceived as economically viable enough to be maintained on the portfolio of the corporation. Yet these workers were denied the opportunity to preserve their jobs and community because the corporation preferred to take a financial hit, in closing the factory down, than undermine the business class war with an ownership practice that could become a potential threat. They feared the effect of setting a precedent in the long term more than the balance sheet loss in the short term. With some federal support this proposal could have worked but it was not forthcoming! It appears that the preservation of the status quo is more important in the US than it is in Argentina where the workers have experienced greater success in similar conditions. <http://www.wv4report.com/node/756>

The **US health care system** raised its distasteful head with a question about how, even though there is an almost total homogeneity **against** the system, it still prevails. The answer of course lies in the influence of the pharmaceutical industry and its protection in law. The solution lies in the American people organising to impose their will.

The Somalian fishing industry and the increase in piracy was partially explained by the dumping of nuclear waste in the surrounding seas. **The nuclear industry** more generally though was reduced to a technical paradigm in which our role is to find sustainable alternatives and to provide the evidence and arguments to justify these alternatives is paramount. Chomsky warned us against pillorying the nuclear industry without a serious evaluation of the alternatives. Do not be fooled into believing that he has any sympathy for nuclear or fossil fuels though. He strongly advocates the investment to be in conservation and sustainable energies.

When discussing the rapid transformation that has occurred in design and technology Chomsky made one of the most important points of the session. He cited the example of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) which received tens of millions of dollars in state investment, from the 1950's to the 1980's. Many of the developments in the private sector would simply not have occurred, he argued, without state funding. Following on from this initial investment the private sector then regularly turns back to the state and the taxpayer when they are at risk of market forces and competition. This is an irony, I would suggest, that is almost unparalleled.

This can be also be linked to another question relating to the incompatibility of liberalism and protectionism. The history of Europe and the US is both similar and diverse on this issue. Whereas economic liberalism reduces state control, protectionism demands that the state becomes a nationalistic force that undermines free trade. Europe and the US have adopted both in the past; however the main difference between the two continents has been that Europe set out to compensate their poorer southern states, before liberalising the markets, whereas the US did not. This has had devastating effects in both central and South America with the Mexican economy, in particular, being destroyed. What followed was not a recovery plan to help but the militarisation of the Mexican border to keep the migrants out.

When asked about **solutions** and, in particular, the uses of demonstrations and cooperatives, Chomsky was very precise. **Demonstrations**, he said, are an opportunity to spark understanding. Always demand feasible goals that are attainable. Avoid goals that are not as they will lead to inevitable disillusionment. As for **cooperatives** he convincingly argued that they must avoid or abandon the whole systemic nature of the market systems. Absolutely no hierarchy! Instead of a 'market democracy, we would then have actual democracy.

The workshops that I chose to attend were:

Inside the Belly of the Beast: Radicals in the Mainstream Media

War and the Media

Changing the System: Radical Visions for Transforming the UK's Media

ZNet, ZSocial and Beyond

Inside the Belly of the Beast: Radicals in the Mainstream Media

Duncan Campbell's groundbreaking work includes the BBC series 'Secret Society' (1987) and his exposure of the **ECHELON** global surveillance system.

Amira Hass is the Israeli national newspaper **Haaretz's** correspondent for – and the only Jewish Israeli journalist to have spent years living in – the Occupied Territories.

David Crouch, deputy Europe news editor, **Financial Times**.

Amira (on a Skype link from Ottawa, Canada) detailed her career in the Occupied Territories and offered three essential tips. 1. When writing do not use clichés. 2. Always talk to those lower down the hierarchy and avoid the official line and 3. The Palestinians experiences are normal so they are ignored by the mainstream media who prefer the exceptional. Thus make the normal exceptional where possible.

Duncan Campbell followed with a summary of his investigative career and his role in setting up the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transsexual (LGBT) organisation Stonewall. His most notable achievement was to investigate the role of the British state and embarrass them into admitting that they were spying on individual citizens using a multi billion pound global surveillance system ('Secret Society'). Alongside the Americans they were culpable of industrial espionage, rather than the stated design of usage for military and diplomatic purposes. He was then able to successfully defend himself against prosecution under the Official Secrets Act and to force the government to change the legislation. <http://duncan.gn.apc.org/echelon-dc.htm>

David Crouch referring to questions asked by the audience highlighted the mainstream media's pressure to fill news space (also known as 'Churnalism'). He compared the media to a baby who sucks on the nipple continuously to fill up on milk and then poops it out (in the form of the 6'O clock news...). He also touched upon the Levinson enquiry into phone hacking and was more optimistic than Duncan Campbell stating that it is an opportunity for the media and the state to look long and hard at itself. Campbell predicted a whitewash. Frankly, so do I!

War and the Media

Mark Curtis is the author of, among other books, **Secret Affairs: Britain's Collusion with Radical Islam** (2010).

Greg Philo is director of the **Glasgow Media Group** and co-author (with Mike Berry) of, among other books, **More Bad News from Israel**.

John Pilger is a renowned journalist, whose latest film is **The War You Don't See** (2010).

This session not only clearly identified the problems associated with war reporting by the mainstream media but also identified actions that activists can apply in practice.

Mark Curtis's main point was to highlight the fear amongst politicians of a home grown democracy that would prevent them from forming alliances with dictators who sit on oil reserves or who sign up to billion dollar arms contracts. The media fail to challenge this status quo and journalists are under a huge amount of pressure not to highlight this. So what can WE do? 1. Write to individual journalists and confront them. 2. To advocate that Non Government Organisations (NGO's) challenge reporting. 3. To increase public awareness and 4. To be guarded by some of the content of the internet.

This last point caused a certain amount of anger amongst the audience as a result of the example that Curtis gave. He highlighted the reaction to 9/11 and claimed that absolutely no evidence exists as to a CIA or US conspiracy although he did accept that the version of events given by the Bush administration did leave many questions without adequate

answers. I was tempted to ask him what his response would have been to claims that the CIA had helped prepare the Khmer Rouge to take back Cambodia from the Vietnamese if John Pilger had not produced the evidence. That it did not happen? That it might have happened? Or that it did happen, it is just that we do not know it yet. However the Chair, judging the mood in the audience, decided it was best to move the discussion on.

Greg Philo, a professor of Sociology and having spent much of his career dissecting the media, was someone I particularly wanted to hear. He set about explaining why the mainstream media is rarely a force for objective investigation and, in particular, highlighted the vested interests role in ensuring that we usually only know what they want us to know. News editors were pin pointed as being under extreme pressure by the powerful to ensure that the news agenda is manipulated. He cited the content of his new book on the role of the media in reporting the conflict between Israel and Palestine and the Occupied Territories and reflected on the moulding of news content as a result of the influence of lobby groups; diplomats; politicians... etc upon owners of news media; trust bodies; editors and journalists. He explained how those who engage in the controversial have their careers put at risk. It is safer to leave it out and let the news remain mostly bland. The Murdoch lobby specifically has been extremely pro Israel which has sat comfortably with most of the Conservative party and many Labour politicians.

The result is that the news renders people ignorant of reality and the gaps in understanding portrayed in the media are almost identically reflected by the public. For example, news reports from Palestine focus primarily upon 'death and upset' in the region but with the explanation emanating from Israel. What is ignored is the liberation movement within Palestine. Philo concluded that the public outside of the conflict generally sympathise with the tragedy but blame the Palestinians for a situation of their own making. It would not happen, the public say, if they did not 'stir it up and bomb Israel'. Thus the Israeli version of events becomes the public's version also. The BBC and Andrew Marr, in particular, came in for the most criticism. They, more than most, are responsible for manufacturing 'false beliefs'.

As for John Pilger I sat and listened. My advice would be to continue reading his books and articles. It is all there.



Changing the System: Radical Visions for Transforming the UK's Media

Michael Albert is the co-founder of **ZCommunications**, dubbed 'the leading samizdat of our age' (John Pilger).

Dan Hind is currently developing a program of media reform centred around 'public commissioning'.

Ruth Potts co-ordinated media coverage for the **New Economics Foundation** (NEF) from 2004-09.

The heart of this session was what **we** can do.

Ruth Potts began by explaining that we have to transform the way that economics is reported. The idea of 'growth' goes unquestioned and has to be challenged. The neo classicist version that almost all editors go with is having a devastating effect upon our society. The media should open up the discussion by asking questions that look outward. At present they merely fill it with Smith, Friedman, Hayek, Keynes and a couple of others and ridicule the rest. Potts cited growth in our economic system as analogous to a man who is pushed from the 100th floor of a building. For the first 99 floors he is wondering what all the fuss is about and growing in confidence as he falls. So much so, that until the last few floors he is at the height of self confidence. Then...! Economic devastation in which those least responsible suffer the most.

Journalists merely report the same thing over and over. No one wants to report that the emperor has new clothes.

Potts does though see hope. She observed that a significant time lag exists between economics happening and it being reported. This leads, she says, to a cognitive dissonance in the public mind. The secret I thus conclude is to ensure that one of those conflicting thoughts is: Haven't I heard all this crap before? Followed by: There must be another way! Ending with: Right let's do it!

So what does Potts consider that we can do in praxis?

1. Challenge the balance in the reporting of economics.
2. Demand responsibility by, and public representation on, newspapers...
3. Training for economic reporters on a whole range of economic ideas.
4. Citizen reporting.
5. Frequent protesting. Keep our voice loud.

Michael Albert reinforced this in its entirety but from a more generic perspective and then made clear that alternative media must not copy the market driven mainstream media in any way. There must be no hierarchy; no profits; no advertising and decision making must be completely democratic. His prescription for the future is:

1. All sections of the media must be under the auspices of activists to enable an anti racist; anti sexist; anti classist... approach.
2. Mutual aid is necessary to enable the message and resources to be shared.
3. More alternative media is required to make it much easier to be found and for it to be as acceptable and as accessible to as many people as possible.

The last contributor was Dan Hinds author of 'Return of the Public' (<http://thereturnofthepublic.wordpress.com/>) who highlighted a major concern of mine. There is a tendency to leave the key roles in society unexplained so that they can be

manipulated by those in power to flexibly reflect their definitions (see Foucault). The media plays no role in informing us of what the normative agenda could be but reinforces the empirical as prescribed by the ruling elites. Another key facet Dan Hind identified was that the mainstream monopolise the access and interpretation of key reports and research. It is vital that the alternative media break this monopoly with perhaps on line sites providing opportunities for the public to vote on the conclusions of reports and research so that **we** can decide the direction and the next step. Alongside this, all public funds that are made available to mainstream media must be held to account by the public and local councils should be persuaded to use alternative sources of the media to report local issues.

ZNet, ZSocial and Beyond – Michael Albert

The last workshop that I was able to attend was with Michael Albert, the co founder of ZNet. He outlined how he funded the internet site without compromising its values. It is dependent upon donations from Z Sustainers who are rewarded by having access to articles that others do not and which are sent to them via email on a daily basis.

More fascinating though was the discussion around ZSocial a left wing response to Facebook. Albert was condemnatory of Facebook's dependence upon advertising and also of its reputation as one of, if not the, biggest surveillance and spying system on the planet. He also pointed to the increasing evidence that, as a result of this form of social networking, our brain wiring is affecting our capacity to concentrate for sustained periods. With this in mind a reference was made to the 'nuggetisation' of knowledge that occurs in the media and can be avoided by writing extended pieces with few links in the content. Information must be consumed without recourse to numerous other articles that distract from the main piece of writing. The aim of ZSocial was to provide an altogether different networking experience with activism at the centre and a much greater emphasis on detail and quality. The intention is that this system will be online during 2012.

And so we ended our conference. We decided that the Sunday afternoon workshops would be substituted with a trip to Westminster to join the 'Block the Bridge' demonstration against the proposed changes to the NHS. Two thousand of us joined together to make our voice heard. No to privatisation! Yes to a top notch, publically funded, health service for all. A shame it was not 20, 000 or 200,000 or 2 million of us. Next time eh?

