

DEMOCRACY ON DEADLINE

The Global Struggle for an Independent Press

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Does a free society require a free press? **DEMOCRACY ON DEADLINE** shadows courageous journalists and champions of independent media as they work to make, and keep, their societies free—in Afghanistan, Israel, Mexico, Nigeria, Russia, Sierra Leone and the United States. **A FILM BY CALVIN SKAGGS**

[ITVS]
COMMUNITY
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[i]NDEPENDENT LENS 



FROM THE FILMMAKERS

Hardly a day passes without another dire prediction about the disappearance of newspapers. Not to worry, we're told. The Internet will substitute for newspapers. It belongs to everyone, and information can flow freely there. But first, without our vigilance, the Internet may not remain free, and much of what passes for information there should be called opinion. Second, a vital press that provides accurate, objective information is not free. Gathering, organizing, and disseminating such information costs a lot of money. Maintaining foreign bureaus from which reporters can deliver on-the-ground facts, for example, has become a luxury enjoyed by only a few newspapers and broadcasters, because all news outlets are under pressure to provide higher profits.

When I set out to make DEMOCRACY ON DEADLINE, I believed that the free and independent American press envisioned by Jefferson and Madison had become weaker and weaker during my lifetime. As a corollary, I believed that we Americans had also become weaker citizens, expecting to be constantly entertained rather than stimulated or informed. We lapped that stuff up, forgetting the addiction Reuven Frank (once head of NBC News) implied in his anger at "market-driven" journalism: "The business of giving people what they want is a dope pusher's argument.... The job of a journalist is to take what's important and make it interesting."

I also believed that there were pockets of courageously independent journalists in dozens of other countries that were working against great odds to make their societies healthier and more democratic. I wanted to hold these foreign journalists in relief against the generally tamer American journalists dominating our news media. In sum, DEMOCRACY ON DEADLINE would attempt to portray the work of independent-minded journalists-what they do and how and why they do it-and to explore the intricate connections of that work to the ideals we lump together under the word democracy.

Vaclav Havel summarized a great deal about these ideals when he remarked that Americans conceive democracy as a horizon we always approach though never reach. The fuel that energizes us to trudge continually toward that horizon is the fresh information provided us by journalists who know enough to ask tough, relevant questions and dare enough to follow through until they get the answers. Such journalists also refuse to accept the tired language, the "received wisdom," of the moment, whether that "wisdom" is delivered by the White House or talk radio, left-wing op-ed writers or right-wing cable network pundits. Instead truly independent journalists find fresh language to revivify our faith that there is an ideal horizon of ourselves as free and just persons still worth trudging toward. The aim of DEMOCRACY ON DEADLINE is to lure its audience a few steps farther toward that horizon and to offer them the pleasure of the company of over a dozen fine independent journalists en route.

Calvin Skaggs

THE FILM

Does a free society depend upon a free press? DEMOCRACY ON DEADLINE: The Global Struggle for an Independent Press shadows working journalists and champions of independent media as they risk their lives, livelihoods, and loved ones because they believe that the answer to that question is a resounding "Yes!" In the current U.S. climate, where journalists are not always held in high esteem, the courage of these journalists underscores the integral ties between good journalism and democracy.

The film profiles journalists in Afghanistan, Israel, Mexico, Nigeria, Russia, Sierra Leone, and the U.S. as they work to work to make--and keep--their societies free. The similarities and differences among governments, media ownership, and journalists' access to resources afford audience members an excellent opportunity to think more deeply about the meaning of democracy and the kinds of institutions that are necessary to ensure that governments serve all their citizens.

Journalists Featured in DEMOCRACY ON DEADLINE

Sierra Leone

Andrew Kroman, Managing Dir., Radio SKY
 Hannah Foullah, Station Manager, Radio Democracy

United States

Ken Silverstein, Investigative Reporter, *Los Angeles Times*
 Warren Strobel, Senior Correspondent for Foreign Affairs, *Knight Ridder Newspapers*
 Dana Millbank, White House Correspondent, 2001-05, *The Washington Post*
 Jonathan Landay, Senior Correspondent for National Security, *Knight Ridder Newspapers*
 Dana Priest, Intelligence Correspondent, *The Washington Post*
 Deborah Nelson, Editor, Investigative Unit, *Los Angeles Times*
 Chuck Neubauer, Investigative Reporter, *Los Angeles Times*

Mexico

Ricardo Rocha, President, DDN TV

Nigeria

Chris Anyanwu, Director, TSM TV

Afghanistan

Carlotta Gall, Correspondent, *New York Times*

Moscow

Alexei Venedictov, Editor-in-Chief, Radio Ekho Moskv
 Anna Politskovskaya, Reporter, *Novaya Gazeta*
 Dimitry Muratov, Editor, *Novaya Gazeta*

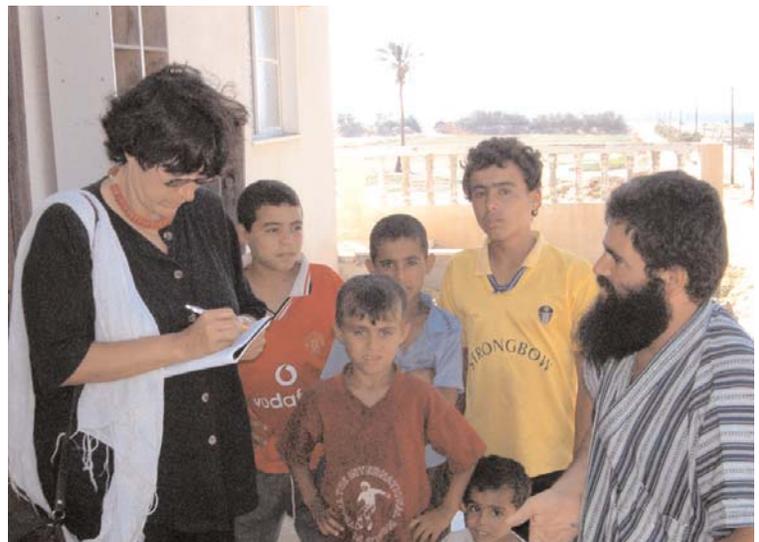
Israel

Yoel Esteron, Managing Editor, *Haaretz*
 Amos Schocken, Publisher, *Haaretz*
 Amira Hass, Correspondent, *Haaretz*
 Gideon Levy, Correspondent, *Haaretz*

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In 1816, Thomas Jefferson wrote that to "remain free, it is the responsibility of every American to be informed." Media's role as the major source of needed information has been acknowledged with special legal protections and the label "Fourth Estate" (equating journalism with the three established branches of government). So great is the potential power of media that modern history is filled with government attempts to suppress or control it.

In recent years, media consolidation has placed control of nearly all major media outlets into the hands of fewer than ten multinational corporations. As a result, many people have begun to question media's ability to function as a watchdog. In particular, concern about commercial influence on news has increased calls for independent journalism, like that featured in DEMOCRACY ON DEADLINE.



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

General

- If you could ask anyone in the film a question, what would you ask, to whom, and why?
- Which scenes from the film did you find most powerful and why?

The Role of the Journalist

- Before viewing, ask yourself: “Do you consider journalists to be heroes? Why or why not?” Ask the question again after viewing. If your answer changed, what prompted the change?
- Consider the following definitions of the job of the journalist:
 - “The first role of journalism is to monitor power.” –Amira Hass
 - “We are supposed to be watchdogs. We are supposed to be aggressive. We are supposed to be out there championing the public good and defending the average citizen.” –Ken Silverstein
 - Journalists “give voice to the voiceless.” –Ricardo Rocha
 - “I report so no one can say ‘we didn’t know’.” –Gideon Levy
 What are the strengths and drawbacks of each of these views? How do they compare with the American notion that journalists should be “objective”? Describe your vision of what a perfect journalist would be. What can you do to help turn your vision into reality?
- Are journalists responsible to simply report what a government says, and let people assess for themselves, or should they also provide an assessment?
- Compare the experiences of the various journalists in the film. How does the particular type of government and/or cultural context influence what journalists do? What are the constant threads no matter the government or cultural context?

The Relationship Between Media and Democracy

- What is the relationship between democracy and an independent press? How would you define “independent” as it applies to journalism?
- What is the difference between information and propaganda, and how does this difference play out in the Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) story?

- Weigh the pros and cons of different kinds of funding sources for media, including government or political parties, foundations, commercial advertisers, foundations or NGOs (non-governmental organizations), and education institutions (e.g., university-owned stations). How does each of these funding schemes strengthen or weaken democracy?
- In the film, the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* struggles with the need to balance printing stories that people don’t always want to hear with the need to sell papers. If you were a newspaper publisher, what criteria would you use to decide whether or not to print stories that are likely to upset readers? If you were Dana Priest, how would you answer readers who say, “We don’t want to know that”?
- What is the impact of stories not reported, e.g., the massacre in Mexico, Sierra Leone’s “culture of silence,” or the attempted suicides by women in Afghanistan?
- Are the media you rely on for information doing a good job or not? What is your evidence? If you had control, what would you do to ensure coverage that completely met your needs?



SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION

Together with other audience members, brainstorm actions that you might take as an individual and that people might do as a group. If you need help getting started, you might begin your list with these suggestions:

- Kick off a voter registration drive by inviting an independent journalist from a country struggling to establish democracy (like Sierra Leone) to your group or community.
- Convene a town hall meeting at which local journalists and community members work together to develop strategies to ensure excellent local news coverage that meets everyone's needs. You might begin by focusing on the media's coverage of a single issue in your community or region.
- Do your own reporting. Next time there is an important event in your community, take a camera or sound recorder. Post your edited story on the Internet.
- Host a panel discussion on the impact of media consolidation on the quality of news coverage.

For additional outreach ideas, visit itvs.org, the website of the Independent Television Service. For local information, check the website of your PBS station.

Before you leave this event, commit yourself to pursue one item from the brainstorm list.

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY AND ACTION

To Start

http://www.previewforum.com/html/journalism_bias/resources.shtml - Preview Forum uses national media and documentaries to engage the public and journalists in dialogue on social issues. Their website provides information on books, articles and other resources on individual privacy, government secrecy and freedom of information.

The Practice of Journalism

www.poynter.org - The Poynter Institute is a school for journalists, future journalists and teachers of journalists. Their website includes a variety of documents and discussions defining good journalistic practice and ethics.

www.aejmc.org/links/ - The Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communications has assembled an excellent collection of links to non-commercial websites related to journalism.

www.cjr.org - The Columbia Journalism Review is widely respected as a watchdog of the press in all its forms, from print to broadcast, cable, and the Web. Many of its articles are available free online.

Independent Media

www.freepress.net - Free Press is an activist organization focused on U.S. media reform and ensuring that independent media makers have a voice on the national scene. The website is a good place to find resources on the impact of media consolidation on U.S. journalism, on keeping the Internet free, and on crucial issues facing journalists today.

www.indymedia.org - The Independent Media Center is a collection of journalists providing grassroots alternative (usually progressive) coverage of global issues. The website includes links to independent media groups all over the world.

www.ifex.org - The International Freedom of Expression website collects reports and articles on journalists at risk and on advances and retreats in press freedom around the world.

DEMOCRACY ON DEADLINE WILL AIR NATIONALLY ON THE EMMY AWARD-WINNING PBS SERIES *INDEPENDENT LENS* ON TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 21, 2006 AT 10:00 PM. CHECK LOCAL LISTINGS.

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ITVS COMMUNITY is the national community engagement program of the Independent Television Service. ITVS Community works to leverage the unique and timely content of the Emmy Award-winning PBS series *Independent Lens* to build stronger connections among leading organizations, local communities, and public television stations around key social issues creating more opportunities for civic engagement and positive social change. To find out more about ITVS COMMUNITY, visit www.itvs.org/outreach.