Epiphany at a Memphis Motel

By Roger Brewin

...the Media Reform Conference ran pretty much according to its preset agenda, dispensing information, forming coalitions, and as was obvious from the reactions of those around me, inspiring many. Yet at the conference I felt informed but mildly disappointed. In the rain, outside the Motel Lorraine, listening to that vital and vibrant dis-agreement, remembering a martyr who had made his views plain and stuck to them come what may, I felt alive.

I never thought of my position as the editor of this Journal, as qualifying me as a journal*ist,* but in the heady world of alternative media, any one with a blog or a byline, let alone their name on the masthead of a periodical, qualifies. FreePress, who run (near) annual Conferences on Media Reform, gave me press credentials allowing up close access to the likes of Jessie Jackson, Dennis Kucinich, Amy Goodman and Jane Fonda, along with a host of less well known figures, at their second annual gathering of the alternative press, January of 2007 in Memphis, TN.

Being a fellow alumnus of the Chicago Theological Seminary with Jackson, I already get to talk to him once a year at reunions. Actually he does most of the talking; you really have to interrupt in order to be heard, and take pretty strong exception to something he says for it to evolve into a dialogue. I was in a little better position as a reporter able to actually pose questions, but still not able to set the agenda—his replies tend to be the ones he wants to give: the pres tend to be his audience, regardless of their questions.

Both Fonda and Goodman met the press in groups and had their exposure professionally managed, as it might be for any celebrity. My requests for individual interviews (I suspect they were among many such) were all ignored. Only Kucinich actually talked with individual questioners, and indeed with almost anyone who approached him, "press" or not. Only Kucinich asked questions in return. That openness was part of his campaign, and a factor of being where he was in the polls.

He was accessible, and spoke succinctly, in detail and in direct response to the questions, rather than just reiterating a list of campaign talking points. He encouraged follow-up questions; he gave responses both precise and philosophical. I mention this because the hallmark, allegedly, of alternate journalism, especially that practiced by electronic journalists, video-bloggers, web sites hosts, podcasters, etc., is *interactivity*—providing your audience with the ability to respond, if not through the journalistic medium itself, at least by an adjunct means, such as a chat line or list serve associated with your broadcast. Of all the recognizable names there, Kucinich was the one who seemed to get this.

Despite the progressive and democratic (and Democratic) nature of this event, with three thousand participants of whom eight hundred carried press credentials, despite a heavy

emphasis on web based means of communication, many of the presenters preferred an omni directional communication. Participants filed into big rooms for lectures and panels, smaller ones for workshops, and in almost every case, quickly became an audience to whom a presentation was made. Questions were relegated to the last few minutes. There was a strong antiwar and anti oppression sentiment in the gatherings, fueled no doubt by the near universal interest in progressive media issues, (corporate control of media, net neutrality, community radio, etc) but there was little of the wide open debate and provocative conversation long associated with movement politics and gatherings.

People for the most part came to listen and to learn, rather than to offer or exchange ideas; they certainly did not seem to want to disagree. It was as if the free-for-all that is the typical on line chat had handcuffed itself to a set of modern American conference-going protocols. Register, wear your nametag, get your schedule, cover as much ground as possible, soak up, soak up, soak up, get your money's worth.

I interviewed about a dozen participants, and half a dozen presenters, asking the following questions: Are you more aware of humanism as a religious or ethical philosophy than you were ten years ago, and how can humanists/secularists, now that they've reached that magic ten percent of the population according to some polls,[1] improve their image and acceptability?

For several respondents who suggested that perhaps humanism didn't need an image makeover, I reminded them of the often-quoted statistic that people are more likely to vote for a gay or lesbian for public office than for an atheist.[2] First, the encouraging news: among nearly twenty respondents, four voluntarily identified themselves as humanists, or secular, even though I didn't ask a question of identification. Only one respondent said they did not know what humanist or secularist meant. Twelve said yes to the first question ("are you more aware?"), three said no and three gave ambiguous answers; in response to the second ("how could we improve?"), fourteen made suggestions, the most common of which, given by ten, was "do not attack other people's beliefs." Four others gave versions of this advice: "stop arguing so much."

But to me the most interesting response of all—by some eight to ten—I wasn't keeping track until I noticed it was happening repeatedly—were the folks who added: "Why are you asking *me*?" Just under half of the responders (including two who were themselves presenters) were surprised to be asked for their opinion. At a conference of progressives, dedicated to communication and the media, significant numbers of people (including some who were providing information to others) found an interactive form of communication (an interview at a media conference!) to be unusual.

Almost to a person, the folks I talked appeared to be intelligent, of independent mind and strong opinion. But it was as if they had been lulled by the sense that "somebody else" knew more about (any) subject than they did, and that the purpose of this gathering was to gather this prepackaged knowledge. I found this response far more intriguing than the actual content of the answers I was receiving. What I discovered flies in the face of the easy assumption (and I had certainly been among those making it) that among opinions

held by progressives, both political and religious, not only was great diversity common, but also a willingness, if not an insistence on expressing it. Here I was asking simple straightforward questions, and the common response was "you want *my* opinion?

Perhaps the difficulty was that I had little practice in doing one-on-one interviews. Perhaps the print reporter for the Memphis daily who covered this conference was correct, that just having some form of media outlet connection (like being a video-blogger or editing a small circulation journal) does not a journalist make.[3] He may be correct, but then his own biases were showing in his coverage, excoriating the participant *pretend*-journalists for having "farcical" political opinions, and mocking the conference in general for silliness (his final article poked fun at the organizers for requesting, at the conclusion of the conference, the return of name badges "in order to recycle"[4] a 3"x3" square of paper—conveniently ignoring, or perhaps just ignorant of, the fact that this is a general conference practice, and that what is being recycled are the fully reusable plastic holders). In any case, I'll let you be the judge of my technique.

I started most of the interviews by introducing myself and offering people a complementary copy of the Journal. The responses ranged from recognition in two cases (a pleasant surprise for an editor) to enthusiasm ("I'm so glad somebody is writing about this stuff!") in a couple of others, to at least polite acceptance. When I asked, "Do you have five minutes to respond to a couple of questions for an article I'm writing?" no one declined.

Everyone was very accommodating until those questions turned out not to be about the agenda of the conference (corporate media ownership, net neutrality or the fairness doctrine), but rather, about the agenda of this publication. These were people used to being asked (I imagine) to brainstorm about projects within their own organizations, and not among those likely to follow blindly the dictates of authority, yet who couldn't quite seem to fathom why they were being asked for their input.

It was as if having assembled our panel of experts, we were stuck with a frame of mind that said, "surely there is someone (else) at the conference) who is expert on exactly what you're asking?" Only one respondent actually tried to send me to one of the dozen or so PR professionals in attendance, but that was what seemed to lurked behind most of the responses: "Isn't there someone (else) here who knows *the* answer to your questions?"

I fear that the progressive movement is becoming an opinion-poly-lith, with diverse points of view carefully divided into camps, each with its own spokespeople and experts, each painfully respectful of the other, to the point of unwillingness to express contradictory ideas.

During that weekend in Memphis, I found only one event where dissention had free reign, and that was not part of the conference program. Nor was any direct reference made to it—though I have to believe that the timing (the weekend of Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday) was not coincidental. At the Lorraine Motel, site of King's 1967 assassination, and now a National Civil Rights Museum, the Monday afternoon

commemoration featured a gathering of local ministers and others, conducting a combination prayer service and press conference, outside, in the rain. I took my press pass and went to cover the event, noting sadly that though several hundred from the conference remained in town, not a single other alternative reporter did so, nor was there any evidence of the local press or city officials—Memphis' main marking of the day apparently being a Pointer Sisters halftime concert at the Memphis Grizzlies basketball game the previous evening!

There under a canopy of umbrellas, stood four distinct groups: civil rights activists, mostly older and church related, younger, more secular street organizers, street gang members and law enforcement personnel. They had come together using King's birthday as the opportunity, I learned, around the agenda of keeping young inner city men (overwhelmingly poor and black) from killing one another They had four distinctly different perceptions of what the problems (besides the obvious one of the killings themselves) really were, and at least twice that many separate solutions were being promoted. A mixture of increasingly soggy suits, casual wear, and two different styles of uniforms jostled and competed for the microphone, for attention, and to avoid getting completely soaked. There was tension and competition, and while there was grudging respect, there was no backing down for the sake of easy consensus.

They disagreed loudly and repeatedly, and none of them were giving much ground physically or rhetorically. But they also poked good-natured fun at one another and found a common bond in the mutual struggle to stop the persistent downpour from going down their collars. In the end they agreed mostly to disagree, but that they needed to keep coming together, "sharing and arguing" as one put it. Pager and cell numbers were exchanged, and there were promises to keep in closer touch. There were awkward and complicated but seemingly promising handshakes and backslaps all around, and then they moved off in four different directions to their vehicles.

The gathering in the rain did not solve the problem it set out to address, and in the ferocity of their disagreement, the participants felt anew the reality of what they likely already recognized. In comparison, the Media Reform Conference ran pretty much according to its preset agenda, dispensing information, forming coalitions, and as was obvious from the reactions of those around me, inspiring many. Yet at the conference I felt informed but mildly disappointed. In the rain, outside the Motel Lorraine, listening to that vital and vibrant *dis*-agreement, remembering a martyr who had made his views plain and stuck to them come what may, I felt alive. Remembering the advice given to humanists by many of my respondents—"don't attack other's beliefs," and "don't argue so much"—I decided that my kind of humanist at least, sees the world quite differently from many other progressives. We welcome disagreement; we like debate; we're willing to take a stand and defend it passionately; we don't have to "bring everyone together" to feel that something worthwhile has occurred.

I wasn't even going to write this article—how much mileage can you get, after all, from advice that boils down to "don't offend others?" But this week I received my press credentials to this year's Conference on Media Reform, in Minneapolis. Despite the

appeal of the A-list speakers—Dan Rather, Arianna Huffington, Bill Moyers[5] —I'll be picking out smaller sessions where I know I have a strong point of view that may not mesh with the presenters. Not just for the sake of disagreeing, but rather to hold up what I believe to be bedrock humanist principles: when someone, especially someone presented as *the* authority on a subject, tells you how things have to be interpreted, what's called for is something more than just a room full of heads nodding in appreciative agreement. Real difference of opinion, respectfully presented and backed by facts—in other words, friendly, but critical (in the best sense of that word) reaction—is always a positive contribution. I learned that growing up in a humanist household; it's been reinforced by seven years of editing this publication, and its truth shone like the sun through the rain clouds, outside that Memphis motel.

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1. http://www.secular.org/constituency.html, "How many nontheists are there in America?"

2. www.religioustolerance.org/amer_intol.htm, "Prejudice of Americans Towards Various Religions: Gallup polls on prejudice based on religion, race, sex, sexual orientation, age, etc."

3 Trevor Aaronson, Commercial Appeal, Memphis, TN, Jan 13, 2007.

4. Aaronson, Jan 15, 2007.

5. www.freepress.net/conference/speakers