

MEF INTERVIEW: JOSH SILVER, MANAGING DIRECTOR OF FREE PRESS

*In late March, MEF interns **Amy Bergen** interviewed **Josh Silver**, Managing Director of **Free Press**, a new national media reform organization working to open up and ignite media policy debates, reinforce outreach efforts in Washington and across the nation, strengthen the media reform network, and — using innovative grassroots and communications strategies and working with other reform organizations — make media a bona fide issue in America.*

AB: Can you talk a little bit about the **Free Press organization — what is it and why was it started?**

JS: *Free Press* is a new national organization founded by **Bob McChesney** and **John Nichols** to essentially open up media policy debates in America and make media an issue. The idea is that media reform is a fairly nascent or young movement and we feel it is absolutely crucial that Americans understand that media policy is something that actually affects their lives. And it's something that people need to engage in and participate in much like they do with issues of the environment, abortion, and health care. The idea with *Free Press* is ultimately to open up policy debates and get them out from behind closed doors. Today media policy decisions are made largely by legislators who have the ear of, or are spoken to, primarily by special interest lobbyists who are hired by the broadcasting industry to win favorable legislation for media policy. Typically these are debates that happen without any public scrutiny and when they are reported, they're not reported on by the mainstream press but perhaps by trade journals.

When media policy is executed on behalf of special interests and major corporations, that is considered by most — and particularly the media — to be exercising a free market economy. When the public interest gets involved and the public demands that news be fair and the media policies actually reflect public interest and a civil society and the needs of a democracy, that's seen as censorship. So this is a crucial idea, that media reform as *Free Press* is proposing it is not with an agenda, it's not to try to create a liberal slant to the media. But rather it's to open up these policy debates with the logic that if the policy debates are made in more of a transparent and democratic way, the result of those policies will be more democratic and will be more responsive to the public interest.

AB: What are some of the short and long-term goals for the organization?

JS: In the short term, we find ourselves in an interesting position where — for example today we've got a whole host of *Federal Communication Commission* proposed rule changes, spearheaded by **Michael Powell** (*the chair of the FCC*), which seek to further deregulate the media industry in a whole host of areas such as television and newspaper cross-ownership rules, additional radio deregulation. These are deregulations that nobody in America supports other than corporations that own the media and the special interest lobbies that work on their behalf. In the words of former *FCC* Commissioner **Reed Hunt**, "There is not a single regular citizen in America who feels as though these are something that would help them." So in the spirit of that we are dealing with those proposed deregulations, many of which I believe will actually pass, unfortunately. So right now, it's not a matter of stopping them, because we can't realistically. But we can prevent the most onerous of those proposed rule changes from taking place.

The 1996 **Telecommunications Act** deregulated radio in a big way. Since then, a corporation like *Clear Channel* — which [*prior to 1996*] owned just a small handful of corporations — went on to acquire over 1200 radio stations and now demand over 27% of the market share, the revenue share in the radio industry; that is a huge amount. And what has happened is diminished localism, less diverse broadcast, jobs have been lost because they pipe in set play lists and set music and it has been a sort of a loss for a lot of local communities. If this proposed law passes, there will be further deregulation. *Clear Channel* will absorb hundreds, even thousands of radio stations. And it also speaks to what will happen to the newspaper and television industries, much like what happened with *Clear Channel*.

In the long term, *Free Press* is supporting the idea that we need to do four major things to improve the media. One is we need, for the first time, we need to have a full-time, pro-active lobbying presence in Washington working on behalf of the public interest. It's amazing; people don't realize there is not a single lobbyist working full-time on behalf of the public interest on media policy issues. That has to change. Number two, this issue needs to be brought to the grassroots. People across the country who are concerned with the environment, who are concerned with health care, with fair wage issues,

labor — they need to understand that media policy affects their issues; it affects their own pocket book, and it affects their own daily lives. That is, if they're not getting a full range of debate, if they're not getting a healthy and diverse and vibrant media, then their issues are going to continue to lose, which has been a pattern that has been happening for a long time on progressive issues of all kinds. Third, we need to create a better and more coordinated media reform movement. Right now, the media reform movement is much less than the sum of its parts. You have lots of really good organizations doing good work. There is not enough communication between them and there is not enough collaboration and synergy so that organizations can actually team up and get more done because they are all seeking the same ultimate goals of creating a better and more democratic media. Fourth, we need to create a better message, we need to create a way to communicate with the American public that explains what media reform is in a more compelling and understandable way than the relatively complex legal and technical jargon that media is often discussed in.

AB: You touched upon this a little bit, but maybe you could go into it a little more. Why do you think at this time, is it so important to have an organization like *Free Press*?

JS: Well there are a couple of reasons why *Free Press* and our mission is particularly important now. First, we're seeing, thanks to an increased corporate lobby and the administration, the Bush administration being particularly friendly to it, we're seeing more proposed deregulation of the media than we've seen before. And there is a crying need to step up and raise the voice of average Americans against the proposed deregulations and other issues such as copyright and the threat to public broadcasting money and other issues that we're faced with.

AB: In MEF's new video *Rich Media, Poor Democracy*, McChesney mentions that the FCC is talking about further deregulation. We know that you recently attended the FCC hearing in Richmond. Could you talk a little about that?

JS: The one and only official *FCC* hearing, held in Richmond this past March, was incredibly instructive because it showed the extent to which the public does not support further deregulation. There were three sessions throughout the day. When the public was invited to come to the microphone and voice their feelings regarding the proposed rule changes — of the some odd fifty members of the public who came up to speak, there was not a single person who spoke in favor of the deregulation. That should make Chairman Powell wonder whether or not he's asking for public input. That's his rationale for holding these hearings. If not a single member of the public supports them, then he doesn't have a justification for going through with the rule changes that he's proposed.

AB: What obstacles, if any, do you anticipate with this organization?

JS: That's a good question. The goals of *Free Press* include a wide range of policy and issues from low-power radio to protecting copyright in the public interest to preventing gross hyper-commercialization of schools and the airwaves to the ownership issue that we've been discussing and as we seek to move pro-active legislation on Capitol Hill in Washington and in select state houses, we will see even better organized and better moneyed opposition, which is the *National Association of Broadcasters* and other pro-industry lobbyists... who will rally their forces to prevent the public interest from winning on the Hill. I think what we'll find is that where we seek bipartisan support for specific legislation, that those legislators who receive major, massive amounts of money from the special interest pacts and lobbies, they're going to be finding themselves in a very difficult kind of cross-hairs between the special interest that helped them get into office and the will of their constituents that want better media policy in the public interest. So that speaks even more to the *Free Press* notion that we have to increase the outreach to grassroots organizations. We have to put media policy on their agenda across the board. We need to rally public support around specific initiatives happening on Capitol Hill and make those long term initiatives pro-active rather than just reacting to every negative rule change from the *FCC* or pro-industry legislation that comes across the Senate or the House.

AB: How will *Free Press* help ordinary citizens to take action or to express their opinions and concerns?

JS: *Free Press* is focusing on a new website at www.mediareform.net, which is an activist portal so that activists or concerned citizens or anyone else can go to this one site and see the issues that are being addressed on media policy listed with a brief description of each one and why it's important and then a set of links that goes to organizations that are [organizing around] the issue — be it emailing their *FCC* commissioner or their Congressman, or a specific letter-writing campaign or op-ed writing campaign, or a demonstration or whatever the specific issue is. Those activities are going to be indexed by the organization name, by the issue, and by geographic region so people can plug in nationally or they can plug in locally.

AB: Okay, that's all. Thank you for speaking with us. We'll be excited to track the progress of *Free Press* in the months and years to come.