Free the Media!

It’s time to get back to our roots—the grassroots—to fight for reform of an increasingly monopolistic and manipulative media.

By John Nichols and Robert W. McChesney

When we helped form the national media-reform network Free Press, we were motivated by an understanding that the great debates about media policy played out behind closed doors in Washington, with corporate puppeteers pulling the strings of politicians and regulators. Free Press, which is celebrating its tenth anniversary, set out to change the dynamic by securing a place for citizens in those debates.
deliberations. We always knew this involved more than just a critique of what was wrong. There had to be bold proposals for how to make things better, proposals that would inspire Americans to join mass movements to counter the mass money and influence of the telecommunications industry.

An opportunity we had not anticipated helped make our network a major player more rapidly than we had ever imagined. Free Press took shape early in 2003, as George W. Bush was selling his war in Iraq. Americans recognized that media outlets had let them down by tipping coverage in favor of a wrongheaded rush to war. When administration allies on the FCC proposed greater consolidation of media ownership by the same interests that had facilitated an unnecessary war, Free Press and allies like Common Cause, MoveOn and Code Pink got an unprecedented 3 million Americans to signal their opposition. The courts put consolidation on hold, citing the public outcry.

Early victories created a sense that we could pressure Congress and regulators to do the right thing. Free Press and other groups achieved significant success with those strategies, forcing the FCC to consider minority ownership issues, fighting cuts to public broadcasting, exposing corporate and government spin masquerading as news, and defending Net neutrality and a free and open Internet. But big media corporations have reasserted themselves. They are spending more freely on campaigns and lobbyists than ever before, reminding all of us that whichever party is in power, the money-power rules in Washington.

It’s time to get back to our roots—the grassroots—and organize citizens into a media-reform movement so big and so bold it cannot be denied. The people are ready. On our current book tour we have spoken to thousands of Americans. We’ve heard the fury at a media system that fails to cover elections but gladly pockets billions for spewing negative campaign ads; that facilitates government and corporate data mining; that creates cartels rather than independent journalism.

We are more certain than ever that Americans can be organized around ideas for sweeping media reforms. They include:

§ Increase public funding for public media. Newspaper and broadcast layoffs, cutbacks and closings have gutted newsrooms, and digital media are not coming close to filling the void. We are as excited by the investment Pierre Omidyar is making in a new venture with Glenn Greenwald as we are by every serious investment in serious journalism. But there will never be enough enlightened billionaires to fill the information voids that have opened. We need enlightened policies. Instead of merely opposing cuts, reformers must fight for massive expansion of public broadcasting,
community media and nonprofit digital experiments. The hallmark of a strong democracy is public support for great independent and aggressive journalism—and a great deal of it.

§ Give the Internet back to the people. The Internet has spawned the greatest wave of monopoly in history. Thirteen of the thirty-two most valuable publicly traded US firms are primarily Internet companies, and many of those thirteen have a market share in their core activities approaching that of John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil monopoly in its prime. This is simply untenable for democratic governance. One place to start: eliminating the government-created cartel of Verizon, AT&T and Comcast, which gives the United States some of the lousiest, yet most expensive, cellphone and Internet service in the world. Washington should establish free high-speed broadband for every American.

§ Restore privacy. Coverage of the NSA scandal has focused on data mining by the government. But private corporations and political consultants have access to the same information, and they’re using it to manipulate our choices as consumers and citizens. The restoration of privacy rights may begin with limits on the NSA, but it should extend to strict regulation of, and limits on, the digital data that can be collected from us, and how corporations and politicians can use those data to manage discourse.

These are starting points for a broader reform moment in which we must limit the influence of negative campaign ads while extending the range of political debate; more tightly regulate the commercial carpet-bombing of our children; and make media literacy central to public education. That moment must be characterized, above all, by organizing so that no matter who runs things in Washington, politicians will know that the people want media that err on the side of diversity and democracy—not profiteering and propaganda.

In August, Letitia Miranda wrote about deregulation of the telecom giants and how it affects working-class and minority people. 

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A Sexual Assault Memoir Women Deserve

Chanel Miller’s brilliant account of her assault by Stanford swimmer Brock Turner questions the way we treat sexual assault—and sex itself.

By Katha Pollitt

TODAY 7:00 AM
In the courtroom and the media, Chanel Miller (left) was just "Emily Doe." Brock Turner (right) got to be the "Stanford swimmer." (Mariah Tiffany and the Santa Clara County Sheriff’s Department via Reuters)

In June 2016, "Emily Doe" read her 12-page victim impact statement to the court before the sentencing of Brock Turner, the Stanford undergrad who'd been convicted of sexually assaulting her while she was unconscious. It was a brilliant piece of writing—frank, angry, straight from the heart—and it seemed to sum up everything about the trauma of sexual assault and the many ways that society, especially the legal process, makes that trauma worse.

Turner’s lenient sentence of six months in county jail and Judge Aaron Persky’s explanation (“I take him at his word that, subjectively, that’s his version of events”) set the public on fire. Within days of being published on BuzzFeed, Doc’s statement had been viewed more than 15 million times.
Donald Trump has demanded to know the identity of the anonymous person who revealed the US president’s interactions with his Ukrainian counterpart. “I deserve to meet my accuser,” Trump tweeted, while at the same time making it clear why the person might be reluctant to come forward.

But there are other reasons besides personal safety for someone in this situation to remain anonymous. In 2003, when I disclosed top secret, classified information in the weeks before the invasion of Iraq, my intention was to remain anonymous in order to keep the focus on the information—American and British efforts to spy on members of the UN Security Council in order to influence the vote on going to war—rather than on me. Yet eventually my identity was revealed when I

**It’s Time to Fight Trump’s Assault on Net Neutrality**

The courts won’t reverse Trump’s FCC. But the states, Congress, and presidential candidates can act to preserve a free and open Internet.

By John Nichols
Donald Trump assumed the presidency and immediately attacked the foundations of a free and open Internet. He did this by putting in place a Federal Communications Commission chairman and an FCC majority that overturned net neutrality protections with the commission’s 2017 vote to eliminate what advocates identify as “The First Amendment of the Internet.”

On Tuesday, the US Court of Appeals for the DC Circuit issued a ruling that effectively upheld Trump’s FCC’s decision, even as one of the judges on the panel acknowledged that she was “deeply concerned that the result is unhinged from the realities of modern broadband service.”

“With this decision, the Court demonstrates it just doesn’t ‘get it’ when it comes to an open internet,” says former FCC Commissioner Michael Copps, who now works with Common Cause on media justice. “Without net neutrality, the Internet is a public utility, a public service that will be controlled by a variety of actors.”

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**What the Godfather of Modern Whistle-Blowing Can Teach Us Now**

As we face two “existential crises,” Daniel Ellsberg’s archives are finally being opened.

*By Katrina vanden Heuvel*
After House Democrats launched an impeachment inquiry last week, President Trump condemned the person responsible for the whistle-blower complaint that set the wheels in motion, likening the whistle-blower to "spies" who are guilty of "treason." It may be tempting to attribute this rhetoric to the president's dictatorial streak, but the sentiment behind Trump's words is all too familiar. Yes, many are portraying the anonymous intelligence official who blew the whistle on Trump as a hero, but all too often Americans who reveal truths about government misdeeds are treated as traitors.

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