

# The Search for FAIRness

Prominent media critic and writer talks about the state of journalism and hopes for the future

As fewer and fewer corporations take up more of the popular media spectrum, it becomes necessary to analyze, question, and investigate the news that we all receive. Jeff Cohen set out to do just that, by founding Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), a nonpartisan media watch group. Now, years later, he has become involved in a new project to fight for fair news in television. He sat down with *City on a Hill Press* to talk about corporate media, the state of reporting, and the fight for a fair story with a new project, Independent World Television, also known as The Real News.

**Daniel Zarchy**  
Co-Managing Editor

**CHP:** Can you tell me a little about your background in journalism and what led you to form FAIR?

**Jeff Cohen:** I'd been a freelance journalist for independent media in the '70s and early 1980s. I traveled around Europe in the early '80s and it was there the idea for FAIR crystallized when I saw the difference between, for example, television news in Europe and television news in our country. Television in European countries at the time was dominated by public broadcasting networks, often insulated from power and politics. I started FAIR in '86; it was at the time the U.S. media were beginning to conglomerate in fewer and fewer, larger hands. At the time we had the Reagan presidency, which was pretty similar to the first five years of the Bush presidency, characterized by very soft coverage of a White House that was engaging in deception and exaggeration almost as a matter of policy. As I was the executive director of

FAIR, I ended up with a new wrinkle to my journalistic career in the '90s and into 2003 when I started appearing on TV as a pundit, and ultimately received some paychecks from all three cable news channels, CNN, Fox, and MSNBC. That's what led to my latest book, which was sort of a tell-all, called "Cable News Confidential: My Misadventures in Corporate Media." So I've seen media from both the independent media and the corporate; I've seen the media from the inside and the outside as a critic.

**CHP:** Now it looks like you're involved in Independent World Television.

**JC:** Yeah, I've been involved in a number of independent media projects. That's one of the more exciting ones, Independent World Television, also known as The Real News. They're attempting to put together a TV channel in the English language that would be a serious news channel, as opposed to say CNN, Fox, and MSNBC and an alternative to those so-called "news channels." Independent World Television / The Real

News is an effort to get viewer sponsors across the globe who will pay so that journalists can bring them the news on cable, or on satellite, or at least on the web.

**CHP:** One of the first thing that it says on the Independent World Television / Real News website is "No government funding, no corporate funding, no advertising, no strings." How important do you think that is?

**JC:** That's crucial, because I worked at the cable news channels in this country, and the very presence of the conglomerate owners, I believe, and I've experienced it and witnessed it, their very presence means that certain stories are off-limits. When I was at MSNBC I didn't need a manager to tell me. And managers sometimes did give us very weird orders to shape the news toward the Bush administration, but I didn't need any explicit order from top management at MSNBC to know that with General Electric as my boss, it wasn't going to help my career if I said "Hey, why don't we investigate how the Hudson River got polluted by this big corporation which prevented the river from being cleaned up the last 30 years." Because the polluter was GE, I knew not to even mention it. Or the perks that CEOs get, that top management gets, at the time that GE is cutting health benefits for its union workers company-wide. That's a huge story that affects millions of people and would be fascinating to viewers, but if GE is your boss, you know that's off-limits. If you work at ABC, you know Disney's interest in sweatshops, so-called "free trade," tax policy, all of these big conglomerates



Photo courtesy of Jeff Cohen

Jeff Cohen speaks to editors of labor union newspapers and with communications directors of unions.

have huge lobbying operations in Washington. When you have a new thing called Independent World Television that says "no corporate money, no government money, no strings," it really matters, because there the journalists can just go after the story and know that all of their income is coming from the viewers, and there are no hidden agendas. If you are a viewer of mainstream corporate TV news, you will not know, but you will suspect, if you are a skeptical person, that there are hidden economic agendas blocking certain news stories and blocking certain points of view. On Independent World Television, you won't have that worry.

**CHP:** A number of people already view public media as an alternative, such as PBS and NPR. Do you think that the government funding interferes with their journalistic mission?

**JC:** Oh yeah, the government funding interferes, I'd say on public TV what interferes even more is the corporate funding. When you and I donate our \$50 or \$100 it goes to staff salaries, it goes to keeping the electricity turned on in the studios. But the corporate funding, when they

come in with, say, one-fifth of all the funding in the system, they don't give money for keeping the light bulbs working. They give the money for program A and not for program B. They are certainly not going to fund a labor show that tells you about corporate exploitation. In American public TV, there's the corporate veto, that corporate underwriting determines that certain programs will fly and certain programs will never launch.

**CHP:** We're all very excited for the official launch of Independent World Television / The Real News next year. Is there anything you'd like to add?

**JC:** The exciting thing in the realm of media is that corporate mainstream media have been discredited heavily through their cheerleading for the Iraq invasion, which is widely understood across the political spectrum to have been a disaster that mainstream journalism aided and abetted. It's helping the growth of independent media, some of whom are able to hire young journalists as staff. That's the exciting development, independent media and its growth is something that can help change the face of this country and this world.



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