

The Barsamian theory of revolution

David Barsamian — author, journalist, 'Alternative Radio' founder — discusses how real change can happen

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David Barsamian is full of quotes. Among his favorites is Samuel Huntington's "Power remains strong when it remains in the dark; exposed to the sunlight, it begins to evaporate."

Barsamian will tell you, in words rife with sarcasm and wry humor, that the media are the ones pulling the curtains.

At a recent Town Hall lecture in Seattle, he tossed out phrases like "Presstitutes," "Lapdogs with laptops" and, my personal favorite, "Press corpse."

"It's an art, really," he told a chuckling audience. "Dead bodies posing as journalists."

Barsamian is a journalist himself, one who is highly critical of nearly all mainstream news sources for failing to question the status quo, distorting and ignoring alternative views, and not only buying into but also becoming part of "corporate crap." He believes journalist Finley Peter Dunne's old notion of comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable has been turned on its head.

"The media function as a weapon of mass distraction, a WMD. I think it poses a serious health hazard for the communication needs of citizenry in a democratic society, and we need to have ideas and perspectives that cut through all the garbage about American Exceptionalism and, you know, 'We are the city on the hill' and 'God's gift to humanity' and all of the jingoistic nationalism."

So in 1986, he founded the hourlong public-affairs radio show called "Alternative Radio," which continues today and is offered free to all public radio stations in the U.S. His work as an independent investigative journalist has earned him the ACLU's Upton Sinclair Award, among other boastings (including being deported from India, likely for his reporting on largely unreported human

rights violations in Kashmir).

It's no surprise that he is a wealth of excerpts and passages. He is known for his interviews with hundreds of activists, thinkers, writers, artists and historians who run against the grain, especially Noam Chomsky. Many of those conversations have been folded into books, such as "Power Systems: Conversations on Global Democratic Uprisings and the New Challenges to U.S. Empire." By the time he arrived in Seattle for his lecture, Barsamian was on the tail end of a Northwest tour with seven speaking engagements in eight days.

He was exhausted, sporting a raspy voice in addition to his ironic "Homeland Security" T-shirt. But he still spoke with passion and unapologetic fervor about U.S. foreign policy, the Middle East, global warming, capitalism, democracy, terrorism, income inequality and, above all else, the use of media across the globe as a propaganda arm.

He spoke from his home base in Boulder, Colo., despite several warnings that these topics "make his blood boil," and that I might need to move the receiver away from my ears. Still, even at Town Hall, he ended on a

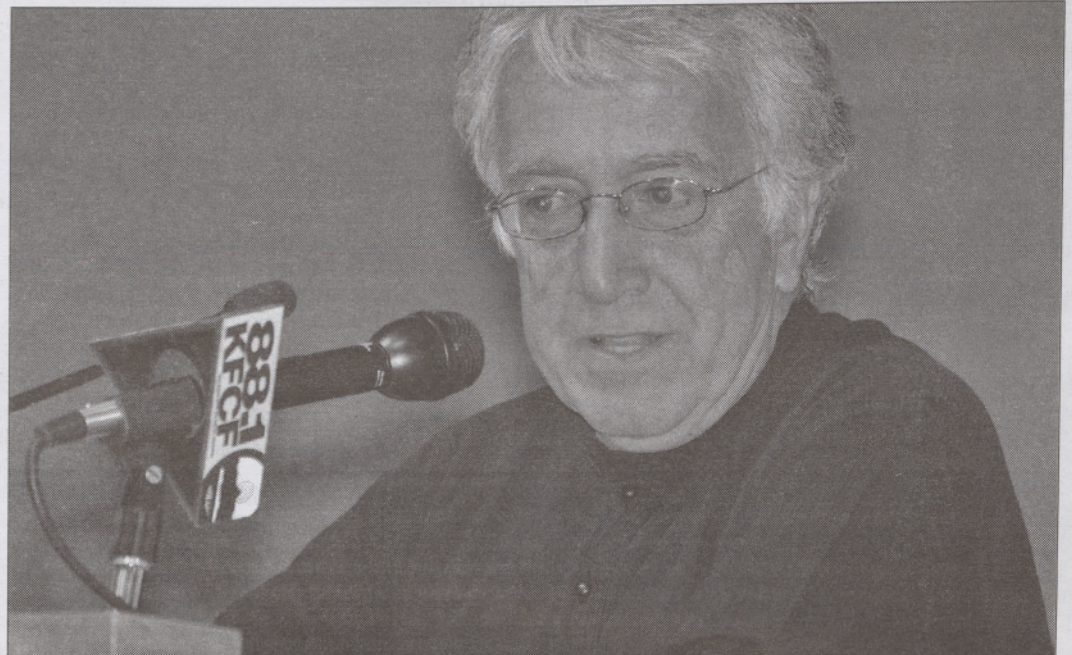


PHOTO COURTESY OF DAVID BARSAMIAN

David Barsamian founded the hourlong public affairs radio show "Alternative Radio."

high note and a call to action. This time, it was a translation of a poem by Ahmed Faiz: "Speak, your lips are free. Speak, it is your own tongue. Speak, your life is still yours."

Rianna Hidalgo: *I wanted to start with "Alternative Radio," which you founded in the '80s. What was going on in your life at that point, and what fueled your desire to start it?*

David Barsamian: I was a volunteer at KGNU, the community radio station in Boulder, and I began the program called "Ganges to the Nile" and another program called "Hemispheres." I was developing my skills as an editor, narrator, writer, producer, interviewer, all those things, and I was very unhappy with the state of the media in the United States, particularly the fact that people I admired very much and thought should have a wider audience were virtually not to be found anywhere — of course not in the corporate media but not even in the so-called alternative media. I'm talking about people like Noam Chomsky and Edward Said and Eqbal Ahmad, Howard Zinn, Helen Caldicott, Angela Davis. People who I believe really need to be heard because of their radical, progressive ideas that were so relevant then and continue to be relevant now.

So, on a whim and with not much background or encouragement, I said, I'll take a chance and see what happens and that was the beginning of "Alternative Radio," which is gonna be celebrating its 30th anniversary soon.

R.H.: *The people you mentioned — what drew you to them?*

D.B.: Well, there's so much crap in the corporate media. I mean, much of it is just sheer escapism, from the latest Jenner operation to a Kardashian divorce to a

Madonna adoption to a Justin Bieber arrest.

The media function as a weapon of mass distraction, a WMD. I think it poses a serious health hazard for the communication needs of citizenry in a democratic society, and we need to have ideas and perspectives that cut through all the garbage about American Exceptionalism and, you know, "We are the city on the hill" and "God's gift to humanity" and all of the jingoistic nationalism.

I was just in the Boulder post office, and there's a huge line there today because there's a shortage of clerks. Workers have been laid off or volunteered to retire early, and I thought to myself, this country can build aircraft carriers that are worth billions and billions of dollars but can't staff a post office; cannot provide universal, free health care (or) universal, free education from kindergarten right through to university; cannot take care of the environment and cannot take care of its poor people.

R.H.: *The list of issues you bring up is long. Is there a current event that you think we should really be paying attention to?*

D.B.: First and foremost has to be the ecocrisis, because that will have enormous planetary consequences. We're treating Mother Earth like a dumpster, like a garbage can, and we keep defecating upon her.

It's going to have extremely dire consequences for the future. That, I think, is something that I talk about no matter what the topic is that I'm asked to speak on, because it is threatening our very existence.

The number of species that are disappearing is at a record rate, the rising temperatures threaten coastal regions and island communities all over the world. The extreme weather that is being experienced