



# THE HUMANIST INTERVIEW

The Pursuit of Truth: An Interview with Amy Goodman

by Jeff Nall

PRAISED FOR HER PASSIONATE pursuit of truth, Amy Goodman is the host and executive producer of *Democracy Now!*, an hour-long daily independent radio and television news program. On January 21, 2006, Goodman spoke on the campus of the Florida Institute of Technology, located in Brevard County, a notoriously conservative county, where her show began airing at the start of the new year. Goodman's presentation was received with great adulation by a community besieged by religious ideologues. Many in the audience were notably affected by Goodman's critique of the profound criminality of U.S. foreign policy as she explained that people around the world hold an emotionally ambivalent view of the United States, seeing U.S. power as both the sword and the shield.

Over the years Goodman has established a reputation as a demanding journalist willing to unapologetically ask tough questions of the most powerful politicians across the political spectrum. In fact, the *Washington Post* described Goodman as "the journalist as uninvited guest. You might think of the impolite question; she asks it." In recent days Goodman's program *Democracy Now!* has spent much time speaking to victims of U.S. torture and discussing the nation's long history of perfecting such techniques. Goodman has received numerous journalism awards, such as the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Prize for Best International Radio Documentary and Best Religious Documentary from the

National Catholic Association of Broadcasters. She is also the recipient of the American Humanist Association's 2005 Humanist Heroine Award.

Fifteen days before the campus event, on January 6, I spoke to Goodman via telephone about how independent media programs like *Democracy Now!* can affect communities nationwide.

**The Humanist:** *Democracy Now!* recently began airing in Brevard County, Florida, an area known for its radical right-wing conservatism. What does the fact that your program now airs in such a community say about people's desire for independent media? And how do you feel a program like yours can transform the media community, mired in the corporate political establishment?

**Amy Goodman:** I think that the traditional political categories are breaking down now—the distinctions between conservative and liberal, right and left. I mean conservative Republicans, like progressives, care deeply about issues of corporate control and privacy—you know, the whole controversy over spying. It's Republicans and Democrats as well as others who are saying, "Wait a second here. Does this violate the basic values of the people of this country?" And then of course there is what's happening in Iraq. I don't think those who are opposed to the war are a fringe minority or even a silent majority, but the silenced majority, silenced by the corporate media. And I think they run across

the political spectrum. People are deeply concerned about the number of body bags coming home: casualties here, casualties there, and what is being accomplished. And that's why I think *Democracy Now!* is growing so quickly and is on a lot of public radio and television stations around the country. There's a hunger for independent voices across the political spectrum.

**The Humanist:** You mention this breakdown of clear-cut right and left politics with the issues you've just articulated, but we also have these other issues, things like affirmative action, where there is a very definitive difference of opinion. Do you feel there's room for those sides to see common ground on an issue as divisive as that?

**Goodman:** Yes, I think there is common ground. I think it's important also just to get the voices of people at the grass roots as opposed to the small circle of pundits that we see so often on all of the networks—this small circle that knows so little about so much and that explains the world to us.

**The Humanist:** There were a lot of people at the start of the war in Iraq who had a great deal of confidence and faith in their leadership but who have now seen a breakdown in competence. Do you think by giving voice to those people, you're emboldening them to get more directly involved; showing them they can or should have a great deal of input?

**Goodman:** I think that information is power and also hope. It's people knowing where they stand. I think someone's political bent doesn't matter. People want to have honest information and then they can make their own decisions. And it's fine to disagree. But what's critical is to have accurate information.

**The Humanist:** In an interview for *Yes!* magazine you said, "It's not journalism's role to pass on opinions. It's journalism's role to get to the truth." Has this become a somewhat novel idea limited to maverick journalists like you? And how do you define the objective search for truth?

**Goodman:** I don't think anyone can be objective. I think we can be fair and accurate and open up the space. This is our role as journalists, for people to have a debate and discussion about the most important issues of the day like war and peace, life and death. I think that's what we're striving for. I think a lot of people have a point of view. And as long as you're honest about that and you make sure that other people get their points of view heard, that's what we can do.

**The Humanist:** So the dishonesty is playing the fiddle of objectivity?

**Goodman:** Well, there's that sense, and we'll bring you both sides. So often Democrat and Republican are not the two sides. Often they're the same side. Let's not forget it wasn't just the Republicans who paved the way for war. The Democrats joined with the Republicans in authorizing the inva-

sion of Iraq. So it's not just the Republicans' responsibility. And I think the range of opinions spreads beyond those in power in Washington.

**The Humanist:** Do you think it makes sense for a sixty-minute radio news program to spend as much time as say, National Public Radio does, reviewing music and discussing art when things are so crazy with political corruption and so forth in our country?

**Goodman:** Culture is so important and it is a response to what is happening in the world. And it also is a part of making the world a more livable, beautiful, and just place—that people are expressing themselves through their cultures. And I hope we bring that to it as well. I think *Democracy Now!* is a very hopeful program because it's people talking about what's going on and talking, most importantly, about what they're doing about it. And that has always been hopeful for people to know it's not just about sitting back and listening, but it's figuring out how you fit into the world and what you can do. It's hearing all the different solutions and organizations that people are involved with and how they're working together. I think that's why, no matter how difficult the issue, people find it so hopeful and why so many people and stations are picking it up right now.

**The Humanist:** Do you have a favorite smaller, independent socio-political magazine that you like to read?

**Goodman:** We comb the Internet and newspaper stands. We talk to many, many people here and around the world in pursuing the stories that we do everyday. So I would say there's no one particular source of information. In fact I think the most important thing is to really branch out and get a diversity of views and publications, and read as much as possible. That's what the *Democracy Now!* team and its producers are doing every day, in addition to working on the shows for the next day.

**The Humanist:** Many try to write you off as a political progressive participating in activist journalism. Should activism and journalism go hand in hand?

**Goodman:** I think it's a passion for peace and for a diversity of voices to be heard. And that's what makes America great. And that's how we can find our way and build a more just society. And there's room for everyone and we have to be tolerant and hash out the issues. I don't think there's one truth. I think it's about hearing different truths, and that's what our role is as journalists—to put those truths out there. ☒

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Jeff Nall is a community activist and freelance writer. He has contributed to publications such as the *Humanist*, *Toward Freedom*, *Impact Press*, *Humanist Network News*, *Freethought Today*, and *Clamor*. He lives with his wife and daughter in Brevard County, Florida.