

# Critical social movements and media reform

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Democracy has never been a gift handed down from elites. It is a hard-won prize, perennially threatened by attempts at economic, cultural and political enclosure, as in the commodification of biogenetic knowledge, the concentration of media ownership and control and the securitisation of the state (McNally, 2002). Whether defined around gendered, ethnic, national, class, environmental or other interests, social movements have long been the carriers of liberatory social change. Critical social movements (CSMs) – movements committed to empowerment of the marginalised, movements that challenge the hegemonies of dominant groups and institutions – are key to revitalising democracy today.

The work of critical social movements (CSMs) benefits millions of citizens, who are not members and may not even be aware of the work of the labour movement or of various NGOs active on human rights issues. Without doubt, the struggle for communication rights is one of the most important democratising struggles of the current era. Given the pivotal role mass media play in shaping public issues and consciousness, the struggle to democratise communication influences the outcome of a wide range of political, social and economic issues – from local urban development to war.

Indeed, the fate of CSMs is intertwined with, and partly determined by, the institutions and practices of public communication that constitute so much of our cultural environment. As Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993) point out, CSMs need access to public communication for at least three reasons:

• To mobilise politically – to attract wide support – CSMs must gain standing -- visibility – in the public domain. They must define issues, name problems, and offer solutions in ways that connect personal experience and public discourse. 'Media discourse remains indispensable for most movements because most of the people they wish to reach are part of the mass media gallery, while many are missed by movement-oriented outlets' (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993: 116).

• Beyond getting coverage, CSMs need to achieve some measure of validation within mainstream news discourse. This means establishing that the movement is a relevant and influential actor, and implies that the content of coverage is not so negative as to trivialise or otherwise torpedo the movement's political project. With validation, a movement's framing of political reality gains credibility; the movement comes to influence public consciousness.

• Finally, CSMs need mainstream media as a vehicle for broadening the scope of conflict, in their efforts to alter the balance of power by bringing in sympathetic third parties. Such potential allies are often accessed through the increasingly global communicative networks that mass media subtend. For example, in the 1990s Greenpeace waged a struggle against forest practices in British Columbia, largely through attracting sympathetic coverage in European media, which helped build a consumer boycott in Europe that pressured for change in the far-west reaches of Canada.

Media shape political culture

Media, of course, are more than conduits for the messages of movements. They are major forces

in constituting the broad contours of political culture (e.g. consumerism, spectatorship and celebrity vs. civic engagement) which is the context for the democratising efforts of CSMs (Hackett, 1991). Media and movements enter into a relationship which influences the trajectory of CSMs at every stage, from emergence through maintenance (or dissipation), to possible success or failure (however that is defined). But the relationship is asymmetrical. Because CSMs greatly need media to help them mobilise, and to validate their standing, while news organisations are less dependent on movements for the stories they feature, media have the upper hand (Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993). CSMs may make good copy; but media have a choice of many alternative story providers. Few media beats focus on social movement organisations (SMOs) and the gap is widened by subcultural differences: journalists are not infrequently politically cynical, activists are often righteous. The fall of the righteous is a favourite media story.

Although the term 'information society' is by now several decades old, in the last 10-15 years media ecology has shifted in ways that are transforming the relationship between media and movements, giving CSMs new resources and incentives to engage in media democratisation. By media democratisation we mean media-oriented activism that expands the range of voices accessed through the media, builds an egalitarian and participatory public sphere, promotes the values and practices of sustainable democracy outside the media, and/or within the media, and offsets the political and economic inequalities found elsewhere in the social system.

The rise of the Internet has been a boon to CSM mobilising, enabling movements to reach existing constituencies, and perhaps to reach out to new potential supporters, without having to depend on corporate mass media. The Net has also made more activists in various CSMs media-savvy, at least in terms of technological skills. There is now less of a gap than in the 1970s, between alternative media producers, and (other) political activists (Downing et al., 2002: 206). However, while the digital revolution makes it easier and cheaper for CSMs to produce their own media, it is doubtful that the Net has shifted the balance of power between the forces of neo-liberal globalisation and the popular resistance offered by CSMs. Communications infrastructure, after all, has helped make the current drive of corporate globalisation possible. Today the dominant media corporations are arguably more cohesive, as influential over public agendas, and more resistant to progressive social movements that challenge core corporate interests, than they were during the 1960s era.

Media institutions have become bulwarks of global capitalism not only ideologically, but also economically. The growth of transnational multi-media conglomerates through mergers and global joint ventures, the technological convergence between once-separate media sectors, the development of global markets in most media industries, the spread and intensification of commercialisation and the decline of public broadcasting, the erosion of the 'public service' ethos in journalism, the growth and consolidation of the advertising industry, the development of communication technology spurred by business demand for the best global communications networks possible all confirm a consolidation of corporate power in the field of mass communication (Herman and McChesney, 1997, chap. 1).

In short, CSMs challenging the environmental, military, social or economic consequences of global corporatisation have a dual reason for taking on the project of media democratisation. For each movement, democratisation of mass media is a means of getting the message out, a way of improving standing while enabling the movement to have its own definition of the situation featured rather than marginalised. But beyond this immediately pragmatic impact, media democratisation must be seen as integral to any radically democratic politics. This is so because media corporations are part of the system that CSMs are challenging.

#### Media democratisation activism

In our research on activism around media democratisation in North America and Britain, we have found it useful to distinguish four major strands of praxis, each with distinct forms of action, organisation, and sites of intervention (Hackett, 2000: 70-71).

• influencing content and practices of mainstream media -- e.g., finding openings for oppositional voices, media monitoring, campaigns to change specific aspects of representation;

• advocating for reform of government policy/regulation of media in order to change the very structure of media institutions -- e.g., media reform coalitions;

• building independent, democratic and participatory media -- alternative media and support services to give voice to the marginalised, thereby opening new channels of communication independent of state and corporate control;

• changing the relationship between audiences and media, chiefly by empowering audiences to be more critical of hegemonic media -- e.g., media education and culture jamming.

The first two approaches are broadly directed at existing hegemonic institutions; the latter two seek to build or nurture counter-hegemonic media practices and sensibilities. It has been striking how many of our respondents seem to prioritise either the first two or last two of these. This suggests a certain division of labour, and perhaps of political style, within the field of media activism (see Carroll and Hackett, 2003).

Although the Left has engaged in several of these forms of media democratisation as a by-product of its politics, unlike the neoliberal Right it has not identified the media as such as a site of political struggle. The situation appears to be changing, but to date the North American Left has not taken the question of structural media reform seriously. In our estimation, there are several reasons for this blind spot. Since the 1970s some on the Left have accepted a naive McLuhanism: a reduction of media to the communications technologies that are supposedly creating an electronic global village. In this perspective, media automatically carry positive transformative potential, and their non-democratic institutional structuring is not considered. At the other end of the spectrum has been a revolutionary rejectionism, grounded in the notion that media (or any other) reform implies some inherently co-optative engagement with the existing political system. There have also been the strength of the libertarian and do-it-yourself traditions (and a near total absence of social democratic currents) in US Left politics, and in Canada a complacency about the need for structural reform – so long as the CBC remained a viable state-funded public broadcaster, cultural producers received meaningful public subsidies, and some degree of diversity could be said to exist among the corporate media.

Finally, some organisations on the Left have been able, by narrowing their focus and focusing on specific reforms, to do well for themselves in existing media, gaining an advantageous profile for themselves. As one media activist pointed out to us, relatively well-resourced groups such as labour unions pour millions of dollars into their advertising campaigns, and thus into the coffers of the corporate media, while projects for media democracy remain chronically under-financed and barely visible in the public eye.

To be sure, CSMs have engaged with media as a by-product of their political activity, typically in one of two ways: a) by reducing the asymmetry of their relationship with dominant media – by developing the organisation, professionalism and strategic communication planning that increases the chances of favourable media coverage; and b) by reducing the dependency on dominant media, by creating their own alternative media. Both of these approaches take considerable resources, and may divert SMOs from their original primary objectives. More generally, as Gitlin has noted:

‘an oppositional movement is caught in a fundamental and inescapable dilemma. If it stands outside the dominant realm of discourse, it is liable to be consigned to marginality and political irrelevance; its issues are domesticated, its deeper challenge to the social order sealed off, trivialised and contained. If, on the other hand, it plays by conventional political rules in order to acquire...credibility...it is liable to be assimilated into the hegemonic political world view’ (Gitlin, 1980: 290-1).

But in posing the dilemma this way, Gitlin, and CSMs up to now, have simply accepted the structure of media as an obdurate part of the environment of social activism. Democratic media

activism raises another possibility – the transformation of media themselves as an alternative to each CSM's lonely struggle to adapt itself to an inherently unfavourable media terrain. To realise this possibility, democratic media reform needs to be recast as an end in itself – a public good – not simply a means by which each movement can get its message out. We can distinguish three basic layers of a constituency for such a movement:

1. Specialised groups working with media technologies and/or within media industries - e.g. journalists, producers of alternative media, librarians. Their work may lead to experiences of alienation or exploitation as they live the contradiction between profit and creativity, and/or to resentment against their marginal status and the devaluation of their claims to professionalism.
2. Subordinate social groups outside media, whose lack of economic or cultural capital is paralleled in media representations which exclude their issues, identities and standpoints.
3. More diffuse social interests that may mobilise around media sporadically, when hyper-commercialised or centralised communications processes pose a threat to humane and democratic values - e.g. parents concerned about media's impact on socialisation of the young; progressive religious groups concerned with media undermining values of solidarity, respect for the Other, and inclusion of the poor and disenfranchised.

Although at a given time the second and third layers of the constituency may have grievances more pressing than those having to do with media per se, Robert McChesney's strategic advice is in our view worth heeding: 'regardless of what a progressive group's first issue of importance is, its second issue should be media and communication, because so long as the media are in corporate hands, the task of social change will be vastly more difficult, if not impossible, across the board' (McChesney, 1997: 71).

#### Media reform constituency

There are definite signs that since 1996 the momentum for democratic media reform has been picking up. In the US, that year marked the launching of the Cultural Environment Movement (CEM) by communications scholar George Gerbner and his associates, and the first of two national Media & Democracy Congresses. These groupings did not endure as organisations, but they graphically demonstrated the wide potential constituency for media reform - independent media producers, media workers, unions, parents, educators and researchers, environmentalists, feminists and gay rights activists, faith communities, ethnic minorities. More recent evidence of qualitative upturn in momentum in the US can be seen in the grassroots campaign by a coalition of left and right to reverse the FCC's liberalisation of media ownership ceilings. In September 2003, hundreds of thousands of people from across the political spectrum flooded the FCC and Congress with phone calls and petitions, making media concentration reportedly the second most active issue on Capitol Hill, behind only the Iraq war (Beckerman, 2003).

Behind this upsurge are several factors – amongst millions of progressively-minded Americans, outrage at the perceived collusion of corporate media with the Bush administration's propaganda campaign leading up to the Iraq invasion; across the political spectrum, dismay at the loss of local programming in radio particularly, as a result of the rapid expansion of chain ownership since the 1996 Communications Act. The national Media Reform conference held in Madison, Wisconsin 7-9 November 2003 offers a window on what seems to be happening on the ground. Organised by Free Press (founded by McChesney and journalist John Nichols), the conference far exceeded its predecessors (CEM, Media and Democracy Congress) in terms of numbers and positive, if angry, energy. Based on Hackett's attendance, here are some observations on what went on.

As we emphasised above, constructing a collective action frame, and a collective identity, has proven to be a more difficult challenge for media reformers, compared to other CSMs. This may be because 'media reformer' does not itself constitute a deeply held or resonant identity (by contrast with, say, environmentalism, which for many exudes a philosophical outlook and way of life). Backed apparently by strategic, focus-group research, which showed that concepts focusing on media accountability (e.g. 'taking back the airwaves') had little resonance with the broad public, organisers of the Media Reform conference evidently recognised the need for collective-action frames that connect with deeply held values and identities in American political culture.

Three such frames seemed in play at the conference:

1. A mainstream frame, apparently intended to appeal to Americans in general, linking media reform to the foundational American value of freedom – the First Amendment; the founding fathers; suspicion of government, and the need for an independent, diverse press to act as a watchdog on the abuse of government power. This frame was articulated by some of the ‘star’ speakers such as Bill Moyers of PBS.

2. A progressive frame connecting media reform to progressive social issues such as the failures of media coverage of the health care crisis, the perceived domination of media punditry by right-wingers, and the collusion of corporate media with Bush administration propaganda about Iraq. This frame would resonate most strongly with liberal Americans, who have become ‘mad as hell’ at the Right’s longstanding domination of the political agenda, and who are learning that the route to power passes through the media.

3. An alternative frame articulated at the ‘fringes’ of the conference’s official program, especially by young media and community activists of colour. At their panel and the wrap-up plenary, they offered an impassioned plea which cast the whole project in a different light. For them, media reform is not some progressive issue which can be picked up by middle-class liberals motivated by abstract commitments to democracy or diversity. Rather, it’s about power, and about cultural and physical survival. For instance, media stereotypes of black criminality can literally have life-and-death consequences, if they make police more likely to kill black people and get away with it. Indeed, this group challenged the very term ‘media reform’ in favour of ‘media justice’, re-positioning the problem as one of social justice in a world organised around globalised capitalism, racism and patriarchy. Even ‘democracy’ was questioned as irretrievable, insofar as, for non-white minorities in the US, ‘democracy’ has meant conquest, genocide, slavery.

The emergence of these strategic frames occurred along with another tactical innovation, as conference organisers recognised the value of celebrity power as a movement-building tool. Moyers, McChesney, Nichols, Jesse Jackson Sr., authors Studs Terkel and Naomi Klein, broadcaster Amy Goodman, writer/comedian Al Frankel, rock musician Billy Bragg, Ralph Nader, and other ‘alternative all-stars’ were highlighted in the plenary presentations, many of them in Madison’s historic Orpheum Theatre, site of Progressive rallies a century earlier with Senator ‘Fighting Bob’ LaFollette. These events achieved very high professional entertainment value and, by contrast with some preceding conferences, there appeared to be no grumbling about this progressive use of celebrity to move beyond ‘preaching to the choir’.

Another contrast from forerunners was the emphasis on building a ‘real movement’ rather than writing a manifesto. Preceding conferences put great effort into the spadework of preparing and endorsing statements like the People’s Communication Charter at CEM, and the Information Bill of Rights at the Media Democracy Congress. At Madison there was relatively little discussion of basic values or principles. Notwithstanding the plurality of collective-action frames noted above, discussions took place on the basis of a normative consensus around shared principles and goals and a shared critique of corporate media. The focus was on campaigns and networking, and out of the conversation several political action goals emerged: the continued struggle against FCC media rules, the drive to legalise low power FM radio and more broadly, the need to defeat the Bush administration at the next election (ten or so senior Democratic Party politicians were in attendance).

Finally, the conference went some distance in connecting the dots between different sites of struggle in the movement to democratise communication. Workshops and discussions showed real effort to link community, national and international levels of networking, and to call attention to the relevance of global governance instruments (WTO, FTAA, World Summit on the Information Society) for local and national media and movements.

In the Madison conference and related developments such as the campaign against further neoliberalisation of the FCC we can find some of the key ingredients – the collective-action frames, the normative consensus and the strategic analysis – for an emerging movement, a movement for which FCC Chair Michael Powell can claim some inspirational credit (Beckerman, 2003: 19). The style and substance of Powell’s recent initiative presented an affront to both democratic and communitarian values. But the arrogance of unyielding, market-driven state power, as personified by Powell, was only a trigger for a process of political mobilisation that has been building since the mid-1990s, and that has every possibility of gathering more momentum in years ahead. For this to occur, the tentative cross-fertilisation between media reform activists and

CSMs needs to take root. Their political projects need to be informed by the dual recognition that media democratisation is a requisite for any significant system transformation, but that media corporations are only a part of that system. As carriers of social change, media reform and critical social movements require each other.

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