Grassroots Media: Establishing priorities for the years ahead.

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Introduction

I feel truly humbled to be asked to keynote this event given the extraordinary concentration here of on-the-ground experience in so many situations around our planet, and the amazing accumulation of insight and thinking you collectively constitute. I wish to congratulate Juan Salazar and his team, from my heart, on creating a tremendous opportunity in this gathering for inspiration and growth. As this century settles down into its chilling challenges of ecological risk, of wars seen and unseen, of nuclear contamination and destruction, of murderous racisms, of the struggle to *contain* women's rights and to *suppress* their opportunities, what we discuss in these days has immense significance for the ongoing fight to realize other worlds.

Worlds in the plural, not a single world: *not* therefore substituting what the French term 'the single-track perspective,' *la pensée unique*, the one-size-fits-all straitjacket of globalized capitalism, for a melded, squished-together 'good' orthodoxy, or a revamped Leninism, or a purified religion. It is not then that another world is possible in the *singular*, but that we have the potential to create other worlds in the *plural*, a deep multiculturalism pivoted on the passion for social justice, which *our movement* media may help numerous social movements to bring to birth.

Getting to that point is slower, to say the least, than imagining it. What's new?! In the interests of emphasizing the value of the practical slog, let me give you a little background on how I came to focus on social movement media, citizens' media as Clemencia Rodríguez calls them, independent media as Noam Chomsky and Ed Herman term them, community media as Ellie Rennie, Nick Jankowski and others describe them, alternative media as Chris Atton and others describe them, tactical media as Geert Lovink terms them, participatory media as Alfonso Gumucio and Jan Servaes call them.

I was always a media junkie, all kinds of media, radio, cinema, the press, books, phones, computers. However, this did not prevent me from a sense of terminal frustration in the 1960s with official British media, especially their coverage of strikes, and of communities of color. In response I wrote what eventually became *The Media Machine* (1980), published by a small alternative press, Pluto Press. But during the 1970s, I found myself also terminally frustrated with the Communist and Trotskyist press in Britain, and the straitjackets in which they wrote. So I wrote seven chapters denouncing capitalist media, and another one denouncing British Marxist media.

There was one problem: it was all such a downer! If people took me seriously, I worried it might lead them into political fatalism. Then I came to hear about the amazing explosion of independent radio stations in Italy in the years from 1976. So I made contact with some of their activists, learned a lot, began to learn Italian, and wrote a final chapter.

In the meantime, after 11 years full-time teaching with no research leave, I managed to get a summer term off, and also managed to embarrass the British Social Science Research Council into giving me a small travel grant to spend three months in Portugal and especially Italy to study alternative media projects there. I say 'embarrass' because the SSRC's committees were made up of 'uni' folk, and I was a 'poly' person, and they preferred to hand out dosh to their own. (For those who wonder what I am talking about, the British polytechnics at that time were a second tier university sector, designed to be teaching factories only, and seriously under-funded.) With the grant, and with the hospitality of an Italian family, I did the tour and the results figured as a big chunk of the first version of my *Radical Media* book, the first version of which was brought out by another small independent publishing house, this time in the USA, South End Press.

Then there were the Dutch printers South End was contracting with, and unfortunately relations had soured to the point the Dutch firm refused to ship the copies of *Radical Media* until South End paid them in full. Which they did, but when the books arrived, the spine had been poorly glued, and as a result when you opened the book the pages fell out and flew about the place at random. Since you could now read the thing in any order you chose, it has the distinction of being perhaps the first genuinely postmodern book … (I stoutly maintained the argument held together a whole lot better than the text.) In spite of

all this, it turned out that it met a need, both in the USA and especially Canada, and became something of a sleeper. The moral of this story: persist!

One more thing: just as the first version came out in 1984, the huge antinuclear movements and their media had begun to explode in Germany, Britain, the Netherlands, Italy; and just as the second version came out in 2000, the Independent Media Centers movement mushroomed – each time too late to be included in the book. The moral of this second story? What we are engaged in discussing at this conference is perpetually bubbling up in new forms with new dynamics, new potentials. There is no end to *this* story.

Four Things We Know About *Our* Media

I want to propose that at this point in time there are four very fundamental things we can say we know about independent citizens' media.

The first is the centrality of social movements, and our need to grasp their dynamics better. The second is the peril of a binary, counter-informational strategy for our media. The third is the crucial role of aesthetic considerations and artists' engagement in the production of our media. The fourth is the ever-present dynamic of repressive forms of social movement media.

Let me make some rapid comments on each of these, and then move on to my main focus topics.

Social movement media

For the purposes of understanding citizens' media, this lens, focusing on their relation to social movements large and tiny, helps us rivet our gaze on the crucial question of how

these media engage with grassroots movements for social change, social change centered around the public's long-term priorities, not capital's, the state's, institutional religion's. How, in other words, are small independent media not simply pissing in the wind? Who cares how independent they are or whether citizens generate them if they are not embedded in something larger than themselves, if they are simply a virtuous hobby? Without that focus, attention to these media always risks being media-centric, and even self-congratulatory.

The counter-information trap

There is a very common preconception that all we need to correct the travesties and lies of mainstream media, bad information, is good information. Chomsky's and Herman's statements concerning the importance of independent media are very much within that frame, and the term 'counter-information' pops up continually, whether in Italy in the 60s and 70s or in Argentina over the past few years. It's not that there is no merit in providing information that has been squelched, ignored or sanitized by mainstream media: there is. It is just that, much as we need it, this is a tendentially reactive, and implicitly rather masculinist exercise, because (a) it stays on the same ground, it corrects specifics but does not necessarily reframe the question; and (b) it evacuates the aesthetic and emotional dimensions of human life, and leaves only facts and reasoning. And then if that is not successful, we shout out the facts more loudly and reason still more incisively. Yet as labour historian Edward Thompson once put it, "fully one half of culture is affective and moral consciousness."

Artistic and aesthetic input.

The division between media on the one hand, and the arts on the other, is basically the low culture/high culture nausea. It is entrenched in our heads and our intuitions. In my second stab at the *Radical Media* book, I tried to break that down, focusing on everything from using the body as a communication instrument in dance, through satire, street theatre, political song and public art, all the way through to the Internet. (I'm not getting any younger, so I'm sorry, I didn't do tattoos!) But the centrality of emotion, of feeling, of imagination, is something that the tradition never genuinely cottoned to, and that quite often the anarchist tradition was no better at either. Yet we can't afford to develop media that simply bisect human beings.

Repressive movement media.

We're not alone in developing small-scale media. Perhaps paradoxically, people often take ultra-rightist citizens' media more seriously as a powerful force than they do media of the global social justice movement. The success of Radio Thousand Hills in the Rwandan genocide, of Al-Qaida websites, of Nazi movement media during the 1920s, such as *Der Stürmer* and *Völkischer Beobachter*, may be one reason. The typical linkages between the state, or agencies within it, and ultra-rightist movement media may be another. But small is not necessarily beautiful, and community is not necessarily lovely. The explosion over the past twenty years within the USA of rightist radio and television talk-shows, of rightist blogs and other websites, of neo-nazi rock albums, is a case in point. The rise of the religious Right as a major political force in the USA is in substantial part the result of decades of patient small-scale communication at the grassroots; slogging away at photocopiers, meetings, knocking on doors, licking envelopes, email updates. Moreover, resonating again with Edward Thompson's succinct point above, the general

public, with its frustrations, anxieties, needs and dreams – and often denied a decent education – is not only waiting for a sense of empowerment and hope from the media of global social justice activists.

Seven Problems Social Justice Media Activists Face

Let me take these in turn, commenting upon them at varying length.

A.   The issue of poverty, of the radical imbalance between access to media technologies and to basic literacy.

I wonder whether you, like I, are beyond saturation point at present with debates about blogging? What irritates me actually is not so much their volume, as their insistent assumption that everybody in the world is wired in to wireless, that everybody in the world has oodles of leisure time, that individual self-expression is everyone's pressing and permanent priority, that everyone has been permitted to access full literacy – and that English is already everyone's second language. Gustavo Gómez has recently cited figures indicating that for every 1000 world citizens, there are 100 computers, 275 TV sets, and 419 radio sets – and that for low-income nations, those percentages shift sharply away from computers and in favor of radio.[1]

Don't mistake me! – individual self-expression is precious, it feeds the culture of horizontal communication. Nor am I mounting an across-the-board attack on all new communication technologies. As my former Global Media Research Center colleague Gado Alzouma's research[2] showed, cell phone/ mobile phone uses in Niger, one of the lowest-income nation-states on earth at this time, present a dynamic picture in a number of ways.

But as we think of how a term like ICTs – information and communication technologies – is normally used, we know it signifies digital technologies. Radio, which continues to be the fundamental communication technology for much of the planet, is implicitly marginalized. Not by the term ICT itself, but by the deployment of the term.[3]

MacKenzie Wark argued more than ten years ago, in a very striking and evocative sentence, that today "we no longer have roots, we have aerials."[4] As an attention-getter to a real change in our global communication environment, his words could hardly be bettered. But the words "no longer have *roots*" technologize our lives to the point of their becoming unrecognizable. And by "our lives" I mean the whole of humanity, not just the segments who live in affluent hi-tech conditions.

B.   The problem of sustainability of social movement media – or is it a problem?

'Sustainability' has been a buzzword for the best part of 20 years now, and like all buzzwords, often contains hidden traps. I think we need to look at this from three angles: the fact that *our* media are so often integral parts of social movements, whether small and local, national or global; the importance of recognizing the full *spectrum* of *our* media; and what I will call the potential ideological peril of sustainability in *our* media.

The linkages between social movements and *our* media – as opposed to repressive social movement media – are complicated and dense, and we need to understand them much better than we do. One dimension however is clear, and that is that social movements ebb and flow, over different time-periods to be sure, but they are not constant. We should not then beat up on ourselves for the numerical decline of social movement media as the movement or movements of which they are part begin to lose their impetus. It would be

much more productive to focus on how to use *our* media to help keep the flame alive during the ebb-phase.

Secondly, the spectrum of *our* media. Perhaps I can comment on this autobiographically. In the first version of the *Radical Media* book I wrote, sustainability was really my key concern. At that time, I was acutely conscious of needing to convince readers, including readers on the political left, that they should take small-scale under-funded grassroots media seriously. How could they take them seriously if they were here today, gone tomorrow? How could they possibly match up to corporate media that can be bought and sold like ice cream cones but still never melt?

Well of course judging our media as though they were corporate media begins from a stupid premise, because they aren't and their objectives, however varied, are radically different from those of corporate media. But more than that, the typically high contribution of sweat equity within the political economy of most independent media meant that in assessing the sustainability of *our* media, I was necessarily forced to examine the organizational dynamics of *our* media projects. If reliable and decent wages were not being paid, what kept these projects alive? And more particularly, how did the frequent pushing and shoving among individuals in the context of any community project, how did the dynamics of egoism, how did the challenges of constructing on-the-spot homespun diplomacy – how did all this play out in sustaining grassroots media projects and in keeping them alive and kicking?

These were and are crucial questions. As feminist writer Jo Freeman argued in a justly famous piece, "The tyranny of structurelessness,"[5] we avoid getting to grips with these issues in the internal life of grassroots media at the peril of seeing them collapse, not

through the state squashing them, or because they have outlived their usefulness, but all … by… themselves!

Yet these aren't the sole questions. In the second version of *Radical Media*, 75% a new book, I focused not only on longer-term media projects, but also on ephemeral ones. Graffiti, fliers, clothes, lapel-pins, bumper-stickers, song, street theatre, satire, culture-jamming, demonstrations, *escraches*, I argued, are essential parts of a social movement's communication processes and strategy, just as much as newspapers, radio, video and the Internet.

The fact they are often here today and gone tomorrow does not mean they never happened or that they vanished without trace. Indeed, I would argue that some arresting images often stay in our memories and ferment there, becoming pivotal in our understanding and motivation. More conventionally organized, longer-life media serve to develop our memory in a different manner. They act more to sediment a steady framework or frameworks for making sense of the world around us and its struggles. The process is almost akin to the gradual accumulation of a coral reef, to the point that we don't actively recognize or consciously define the definitional frameworks we live by, but they are invisibly entrenched nonetheless in our memories, as firm as coral.

My point is that *our* media encompass both, not one or the other. And that as social movements develop media, our communication strategies are most likely to flourish in the *combination* of the fleeting and temporary with the enduring and sustained.

Moreover, very briefly, I think we need to recognize that sustainability may sometimes be achieved by very ideologically cohesive media projects, representing a highly sectarian outlook that provides the necessary glue for endurance. The sectarianism in

question may be religious or secular, but in terms of the highest vocation and opportunity for *our* media, namely to enable and strengthen horizontal communication, interactive education, exploration, growth, that kind of sustainability comes at far too high a price.

C.   Questions of distribution, the frequent gulf between the virtual impossibility of production with no resources, and the seeming impossibility of getting our media work out there.

The headache of distribution has been a central issue for alternative media activists for a very long time. Absence of financial resources means that getting the whatever-it-is produced is already often a huge challenge. Then both finance and – not least! – the state, stand like massive Chinese temple lions in our path, blocking us from circulating and diffusing the media we have produced. And whatever the difficulties media activists face in affluent formal democracies, they are puny by comparison with the obstacles confronting social movement media elsewhere on the planet.

That said, in affluent parts of the planet, and very slowly extending out across the planet as a whole, the digital and satellite and wiki era has opened up some new possibilities, especially once we leave behind the 'mass' communication obsession. Some writers today refer to 'the long tail' of media, meaning that giant media institutions such as Sony, News Corp., Bertelsmann, obviously continue to enjoy a dominant position, but that small and medium-scale communication opportunities have opened up on a scale that barely existed before. That an everyday blog could easily be read by ten thousand people, compares extremely well to the average book's readership figures. As Brewster Kahle of the Internet Archive put it in a NAMAC report in 2004, "we can get thousands of hours, tens of thousands of hours, hundreds of thousands of hours of [people's] video up, usable,

multiple formats, high res, low res, catalogued, captioned. We can get these materials online very, very, very inexpensively."[6]

D.   Audiences, readers, users, and the question of listening.

How little we often *know* about the people who use our media! There are understandable reasons, of course: the intensity of the work of producing our media, especially when the movement's tide is running high, and the huge sweat equity we pour into these projects, leaving too little time often for our loved ones. But there are also less admirable reasons, such as our presumption that, because people earlier on were interested in our work, they still are. It's complicated precisely because our users are often movement activists, not conventional audiences or readers. But this is a great opportunity for university activists to provide a user-research service to media activists.[7]

An important further thought on this issue is provided by the work of Charles Husband,[8] over a number of years now, on what he calls 'the right to be understood,' a 'third-order' human right (beyond first-order individual rights and second-order economic rights). Outrageously utopian as his language sounds – however clumsily I express myself, I have a *right* to be understood? – it nonetheless pinpoints a vital issue left hanging by the language of the 'right to communicate.' If we are all communicating, is anyone listening? And in particular, if we have been effectively shut out from official public communication, if we are women, First Nations, refugees, children, undocumented workers, who is there who has any sense of obligation to listen to us, to the specifics of our experience, to our framing of the world? Yet without the right to be understood, signifying our serious and sustained commitment to listening in order to try to understand

other experiences and frameworks that appear alien to us, we can have access to all the communication channels we want without there emerging any constructive cultural change whatsoever. And this commitment to listening is one which we media activists need to take to our readers and other users.

The remaining three issues I will address rather summarily here, but that is not designed to understate their significance.

E.   Media reform, media literacy, and Our Media.

The media reform movement globally has many faces. The issues are sharply different in India and Burma, for instance. Also a host of questions are often addressed under the "media reform" umbrella (corporate media monopolization, copyright and copyleft, network neutrality, digital exclusion, surveillance, privacy). The media literacy movement is an updated civic education movement for the information society. But there is a tendency for people identified with one or other of these sectors, or with the grassroots media sector, to dismiss the work of the other sectors as misdirected. We know the standard mutual accusations: 'media' are irrelevant because 'information technology' is everything, opponents of media mergers are wasting their time on trying to change the mastodons, grassroots media activists are wasting their time on virtuous but pointless trivia, education for media understanding and use is the real long-term task, media education just becomes another curriculum change … And on and on.

My point is only that all these activities together are essential to the achievement of better levels of global social justice. Chipping away at each other's work, turning the work one does into one's superior social identity, are deeply counterproductive and irresponsible.

F.   Surveillance and the state.

I am not one of those who take an almost masochistic pleasure in detailing Big Brother's technology of watching and listening to us. But nor do I think it wise to assume we are playing in our quiet corner of the Internet, and that nobody is noticing us as we express ourselves to our hearts' content. For social movement media activists it is vital to be aware of the ways in which the national-security state is, or may be, reshaping the architecture of the Internet in the U.S. Homeland Security/Patriot Act model. I could wish this were a problem simply for activists in affluent nations, but the Internet is global, and if media activists in those countries find themselves blocked, then information access and communication potentials in the rest of the globe are rather likely also to shrink. Access to transnational corporate information, for example, is often a lot easier in affluent nations than in the countries of the global South which they are pillaging.

Indeed, every time a country historically identified as more open for public communication than others – e.g. the USA, Britain, Canada, Australia, France – closes down on its freedoms, in countries with less successful histories to date of struggles for those freedoms their regimes happily point to the crackdown to justify their repressive communication policies. The readiness of News Corp. to block BBC news in its China satellite service, and of Google and Yahoo to collaborate with the Chinese regime, are further instances of the mutual reinforcement of capitalist market forces and the logic of state repression in the field of public communication.

G.   Global connections and the problem of language.

We come finally to the simplest, most basic, yet in some ways the most intractable issue of all. A century ago, many in the anarchist movement hoped that Esperanto would

provide the solution, and indeed Indymedia Brazil, at least to the time of writing, had some postings in Esperanto. The International Workers of the World labour movement organization in the USA at that time had activists with connections to different European countries who could together address strike meetings in Slovak, Polish, Hungarian, Italian, Yiddish, Russian and still other languages. At this point, English dominance appears to be both the solution and the problem, although it is encouraging to note the emergence of many Englishes in speech and literature in south Asia, parts of Africa, and anglophone nations.

In many parts of the world, it is normal for people to have at least a working knowledge for daily purposes of three or four languages, sometimes with sharply different vocabularies and structures. If we are to be media activists in the contemporary world, we need to try to learn another language, to provide realistic and attractive incentives for our children, if we have them (or nieces and nephews and grandchildren), to learn another language *early* before inhibition sets in and slows their progress down.

At the very least, we need to focus on making our uses of language livelier and more intense, as well as always working on making our writing and speaking more limpid. I am not much of a body-builder myself, as even the short-sighted here will quickly perceive, but if we think of our language use in our media activist capacity as needing a kind of continuous chest-expander, stretching and intensifying the language, pushing oxygen into our speech and writing, it may help our projects maintain a freshness and vitality that historically progressive media activism has all too often lacked. Naturally music, visuals, color, other forms of sound, organizing information, also need continual re-energizing. But language is the heart of the matter.

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Bio

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[1] Gómez 2007.

[2] Alzouma 2005.

[3] For some counter-examples see Girard 2003; Downing & Brooten 2007.

[4] Wark, M. 1994, p. x.

[5] Freeman 1973.

[6] Blau, A. 2004, pp. 47-48.

[7] For further thoughts on the user-dimension, see Downing 2003.

[8] See Downing & Husband 2005, chapter 8.