

❖ **BUILDING OUR MEDIA: COMMUNITY BROADCASTING, SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND MEDIA DEMOCRATIZATION**

Robert A. Hackett — School of Communication, Simon Fraser University
with William K. Carroll — Department of Sociology, University of Victoria
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Community broadcasting can be seen as an important pillar of a broader, and increasingly global, process – that of media democratization. What do we mean by that term? Media democratization comprises efforts to change media messages, practices, institutions and contexts, including State and international communications policies, in a direction that enhances participation and equality, and helps to enable a social order that nurtures the autonomy and development of all people within it (Hackett & Carroll 2006, 88). Put differently, media democratization is part and parcel of building “communicative democracy”, the institutional organization of public communication, so as to enable all groups and sectors in society to place ideas and elements of culture into general circulation, and to participate in constructing public cultural truth (Jakubowicz, 1993; White, 1995).

Both ideologically and historically, the expansion of communication rights has often been a by-product of the energies of social movements that seek to tell the suppressed stories of the people, and advance their interests (Traber, 1993). Historically, counter-hegemonic movements have built radical media that contest not only the social order but also, implicitly at least, the dominant means of public communication (Downing et al, 2001). In recent decades, and particularly the past several years, such radical media have been joined by media reform advocacy groups that consciously seek not only to use communications media to pursue their primary political goals, but rather, directly and explicitly, to transform the media system as such.

Such movements are responding to regimes that deny popular communication rights, and thereby inhibit the prospects of success for progressive social movements. Such repression is most obvious in the case of dictatorships that deny people the freedom to express their opinions. But even in the Anglo-American North Atlantic heartland of neo-liberal globalization and, (rather debatably), political democracy, there is a massive ‘democratic deficit’ in public communication, with a number of dimensions. According to Hackett and Carroll (2006, Chap. 1) these include:

- the media system’s failure to constitute a democratically adequate public sphere;
- centralization of political and symbolic power inherent in the political economy of media industries;
- media’s complicity in maintaining inequality through exclusions of culture and class that include the ‘digital divide’;
- media’s role in homogenizing social viewpoints – narrowing the diversity of public discourses;
- media’s failure to help sustain healthy communities and political cultures, due to factors ranging from insufficient localism and excessive national chauvinism, to commercially-driven audience fragmentation and content trivialization
- media’s participation in the corporate enclosure of knowledge through expansion of ‘intellectual property rights’;
- elitist processes of communication policy-making, which exclude the public from shaping mandates of the cultural industries;
- erosion of privacy, and the increase in surveillance and censorship, in electronic space since the events of 9/11, 2001.

Is the Democratic Deficit Lethal?

Around the world, the negative consequences of undemocratic media abound. Sometimes it is not too much

to say that media justice is a matter of life and death. Most obviously, consider the role of radio in facilitating and co-ordinating the genocide and 'ethnic cleansing' in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Even in the US, a country with a formal constitutional commitment to freedom of the press, undemocratic media can have lethal consequences. Many critics hold the US news media partly responsible for the ability of the Bush administration to sway public opinion in favour of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, with all its disastrous consequences. American media failed critically to examine key administration claims about Saddam Hussein's alleged weapons of mass destruction or his implied connection to al Qaeda and the 9/11 terrorist attacks, often even amplifying these dubious claims. Conversely, media underplayed counter-balancing themes such as previous British and American support for Saddam's regime, alternative ways of deposing him without war, and Iraqi civilian casualties resulting from years of UN sanctions and from the invasion itself (for example see Kellner, 2005,63-100; Solomon & Erlich, 2003).

What accounts for these patterns of coverage? Consider the layers or levels of factors that influence the production of news (Shoemaker & Reese, 1995). At every level, powerful influences pushed American journalism towards a propagandistic role before the Iraq war: the ideological and professional assumptions of news workers themselves; daily routines that embody dependence on official sources (and "embeddedness" with the troops); the organizational needs of media corporations (such as the pursuit of profits and ratings); extra-media factors (such as an institutional complex that makes corporate media natural allies of US militarism and capitalist globalization); and ideology and culture (currently hegemonic myths of the American nation and its experience of war) (Hackett, 2004; McChesney, 2002).

Does it matter how the dominant media framed the Iraq crisis, or whether they looked for contexts and realities beyond official claims? Public opinion research suggests that ordinary Americans do not lightly approve of war, but rather that six 'screens' need to be passed before they will support military interventions: a rogue leader or regime; evidence tying them to heinous crimes or imminent threat; the exhaustion of non-military means; military allies to share the risks; a visionary objective (such as liberation or peace); and early non-military intervention (Kay, 2000, cited in Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005, 97). In light of that model published before the fateful year of 2001, the dominant US news media helped to create perceptions that pushed public opinion through those screens.

The lethal consequences of the democratic deficit are not limited to genocide and war on such a terrifying scale. Consider the role of media stereotyping in reinforcing everyday racism. Malkia Cyril and her colleagues at the Oakland-based Youth Media Council have argued that the continual media representation of young black males as criminals makes it easier for police to shoot unarmed African Americans with impunity.

Quite apart from war and hate propaganda, media concentration can have deadly, if unintended, side effects. Following the 1996 Telecommunications Act which allowed a few large companies to buy up an unprecedented number of local stations, corporate rationalization and cost-cutting led to drastic reductions in local programming. Eric Klinenberg (2007, 6-7) tells the story of one of the consequences. In Minot, North Dakota, on January 18, 2002, a freight train derailment released a toxic cloud of 240,000 gallons of anhydrous ammonia. Terrified citizens tuned in to radio KCJB AM910, the designated emergency broadcaster, for directions on how to stay safe. But instead they discovered:

...KCJB, and every other radio station in town, were not reporting any news or information about the anhydrous spill. Instead, all six of Minot's name-brand stations...continued playing a standard menu of canned music, served up by smooth-talking DJs trading in light banter and off-color jokes while the giant toxic cloud floated into town. Although the broadcasts originated in Minot, every one of the town's commercial stations was owned and operated by the San Antonio-based conglomerate Clear Channel Communications, which acquired the outlets in 2000 and replaced locally produced news, music and talk programs with prepackaged content engineered in remote studios and transmitted to North Dakota through digital voice-tracking systems. Clear Channel consolidated operations for its Minot stations into two central offices, neither of which had a live staff member interrupt the regularly scheduled automated shows to issue an alert immediately after the spill.

People didn't know to avoid going outdoors, or driving through the toxic cloud. The result: one death, seventeen injuries, 330 immediate health problems, and over a thousand more during the next month, out of a population of 37,000. Perhaps local emergency response planners should have been better prepared, but radio industry concentration, and its "Wal-martization" of local communities, were integral to this deadly picture.

Upon consideration, the lethal democratic deficits noted above can be seen as failures by dominant media to help build sustainable and just communities. The town of Minot lacked reliable local radio. Rwanda's Tutsi community and African-Americans in the US, lacked a sufficient voice to defend their communities from the promotion of hatred in mass media. Rwanda itself apparently lacked consensus-building national media. And the community of global opposition to the Iraq war could not counter the domestic power of America's war propaganda machine.

Good News

The good news, as noted above, is that even in the heartland of global capitalism, there is an emergent movement to democratize media. Organized networking and advocacy to change the structures or practices of media, and/or the rules of media governance, is occurring at local, national and transnational levels. Such activism takes a variety of strategic routes encapsulated by the slogan of Vancouver's annual Media Democracy Day: "Know the media, change the media, be the media". Knowing the media implies media education, understood broadly, from developing curricular materials for schools (like the British Columbia Association for Media Education), undertaking satirical exposes of mass-mediated consumerism (AdBusters magazine), or conducting research on press coverage of public issues (NewsWatch Canada).

"Being the media" refers to independent, alternative or citizens' media, which have illuminated the history of democratic movements and resistance to oppression (Downing et al, 2001), and which can help to counterbalance the media's democratic deficit (and its lethal consequences). As a transnational network of community media, Our Media is arguably a force for this kind of media democratization, and in the display tables at Vancouver's Media Democracy Day, citizens' media have always been well represented.

Changing the media can include "strategic communication" on the part of citizens' groups in efforts to shift the frames and content of dominant media. It also includes struggles within the belly of the beast, as media workers' unions seek to protect what they can of journalists' professional autonomy, and sometimes develop policy proposals for more democratic media (like the year-long exercise by Canada's Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union to develop a policy manual, For Democratic Canadian Media). At its most ambitious level, changing the media entails tackling the state and its regulatory agencies, which set the rules that shape who owns and controls media, who has access, what subsidies and support they receive, what kind of content and usages are most likely to dominate the media, given the incentive structure that policy creates.

Rewriting the rules is the project of media reform, and that will only move in a progressive direction on the backs of a broad coalition, spearheaded by groups focusing on policy reform. Fortunately, these are emerging in the North Atlantic heartland, including Britain's longstanding Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom, Free Press formed in the US in 2002, and most recently, Canada's Campaign for Democratic Media (www.democraticmedia.ca).

Civil society-based media reform coalitions are emerging at the international level as well. One example is the Campaign for Communication Rights in the Information Society, or CRIS. Several activist researchers connected with CRIS have identified key principles and policies that need forceful articulation within the emerging system of global media governance, currently dominated by the contradictory and often destructive logic of neoliberalism. These are:

- Strengthen public access to information; combat enclosures of the public domain that are imposed by restrictive so-called "intellectual property right" regimes;
- Set technical standards for the internet to make them more friendly to the needs of developing countries;
- Limit concentration of global media ownership;
- Support public service and community media, both within and between nations and cultures;
- Regulate telecommunications to provide universal service, and 'network neutrality' (fair access to content and service providers);
- Support freedom of expression, but also recognize legitimate limitations on it, such as incitement to hate and genocide (O Siochru, Girard & Mahon 2002, 176-79).

Social Movement Theory and Democratic Media Activism (DMA)

Media democratization is not going to occur as a 'natural' byproduct of dominant social logics. To the contrary, media democratization constitutes a challenge to the centralization of political power in the hands of states, whether old-style authoritarian governments, or the emerging "market authoritarian" regimes needed to enforce the global patterns of inequality, exclusion, expropriation, exploitation and coercion associated with neoliberalism. Moreover, the full realization of media democratization entails an "enabling environment" that extends well beyond the media field, to include also a supportive legal framework, a redistribution of material and symbolic resources, and a culture that privileges values of respect and participation (Zhao & Hackett,

2005). For all these reasons and more, the democratization of communication can be regarded as "a social movement process" (White, 1995). At their best, social movements embed some of the practices of democratic communication, but in addition, the scale of transformation needed to actualize "communicative democracy" (Jakubowicz, 1993) on a society-wide basis necessitates the mobilization of movement energies. Thus, it would be useful to consider the recent emergence of media reform coalitions and democratic media activism (DMA) in light of social movement theory, complemented by Pierre Bourdieu's field theory. Does DMA constitute a nascent movement in its own right? What does theory suggest about DMA's prospects for political success and about the role of community broadcasting in relation to it?

We cannot address those questions fully here. Instead, we draw from a recent book on "the struggle to democratize public communication" in order to highlight some of the most pertinent arguments (Hackett & Carroll 2006).[1]

Social movement theory and an analysis of the institutional fields within which DMA intervenes (i.e., the media, and national and international politics), suggest some distinctive characteristics of DMA:

- Resource Mobilization Theory highlights that DMA has an especially strong 'free rider' problem. That is, the effort to achieve democratic media falls disproportionately on specialized individuals and groups, but the benefits are widely dispersed. The incentive facing communities and movements that would benefit from democratic media, is to let others do the work of achieving them. But of course, if everybody does that, there would be no activism, no movement.
- DMA arises partly out of the asymmetrical relationship between dominant media and movements; movements are more dependent on the media than vice versa (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993). In their efforts to win more discursive space for their own struggles, each movement potentially improves the conditions of access to the public sphere for other progressive movements. But more than most movements, DMA will face a publicity blockade from the media institutions that it critiques.
- Our case studies, and much other research and practice, strongly suggest that DMA emerges in large part from broader political and social waves – especially the communicative needs and political struggles of subaltern groups and communities, and critical social movements – such as organized labour in the UK, and racialized minorities in the US.

Using Pierre Bourdieu's technique of field analysis, we consider that DMA is attempting to intervene in the field of media, as a relatively autonomous institutional sphere with its own logics, agent-positions, and forms of capital (resources) for which they compete. The media field (within 'advanced' national states) has characteristics that help condition the nature of DMA:

- high capacity to intrude on the functioning of other fields (such as politics and the economy)
- vulnerability to influence from the political and economic fields, even structured subordination to them;
- boundaries that are porous and ill-defined: consider the difficulty of defining who is a journalist, as blogs and citizens' journalism emerge on the internet, and as the traditional providers of mainstream journalism, media corporations, either abandon investment in primary newsgathering, or transform their news content into commercialized infotainment.

What are some of the implications of the above points, extracted from much broader traditions in social theory?

- The weakness of media/journalism's autonomy from state and capital puts severe limits on the strategy of reform from within, in the absence of strong allies from without. The strategic importance of media to the legitimization, publicity and marketing needs of corporations and states, means that effective media reform campaigns are likely to provoke hostile reaction.
- At the same time, struggles against the power of capital and/or state on non-media fronts, will often overlap with the 'contestation of media power' (Couldry, 2003); a media democracy project has beneficiaries, and potential allies, outside the media field.
- The specificity of the media field suggests the need to develop capacities and strategies suited to mobilizing constituencies, in ways that enable media power to be challenged. The media field creates many potential beneficiaries for media democratization, but only some groups have been drawn into DMA.
- DMA lacks a clear collective identity, given its largely secondary nature as a by-product of other movements, and its low issue salience. It is a 'process issue' that does not threaten material interests strongly and directly enough to inspire an 'old-style' movement like organized labour. Nor does it often evoke identities as distinct from, nor as deep as, other so-called new social movements. Many people self-identify as environmentalists or feminists or gays/lesbians; few activists identify themselves primarily as media democrats.
- Crucially, DMA is less likely to constitute a movement in itself than a nexus between movements.

Community Media and Democratic Media Activism

The points sketched above suggest several reasons for regarding community-based and participatory media, run by and for the communities they are intended to serve, as having an especially important role in the broad and global struggle to achieve popular and democratic media.

1. *Connection to Social Movements.* History shows that popular, radical and community media, as well as media activism, are connected to broader social and political currents, particularly social movements, and cycles of protest (Downing et al, 2001). Community media often function, if not as the voice of other social

movements, then in sympathetic engagement with them. One thinks of Co-op Radio in Vancouver, which has programs empowering distinct communities from Palestinians and union workers, to gay, lesbian and transgendered people. There are also programs on the environment and current affairs from a progressive perspective. Our research found that a particularly important vector of media democratization – evident in the history of San Francisco’s Media Alliance and other groups – runs from such subaltern communities, to media training or media production (including community broadcasting), to interventions that challenge dominant media structures and policies (Hackett & Carroll, 2006, 109). Community media are an important potential link between media activism, and broader social movements.

2. *Incentives.* Community media would benefit directly from the kinds of reforms proposed by progressive media policy advocacy. At both the national and transnational levels, media reformers like CRIS, call for legal recognition and material support for community and public service media as a way to enhance communication rights. That is not to deny that there are potential tensions between prioritizing tax-supported state-owned public broadcasters versus community broadcasters, or between the citizen-journalists of community media and salaried journalists in the corporate press. Such tensions require an expansive and ‘big tent’ vision for media democratization; no single type of media can serve all democratic purposes, and a fully democratic communication system requires structured pluralism (Curran, 2000). Generally speaking, media reform would bring benefits to the values and communities that community media serve. Thus, of all the potential beneficiaries of media reform, community media and their constituencies are at the forefront.

3. *Lowering the “costs of mobilization”.* Community media are particularly well-placed to overcome or bypass some of the barriers that full-fledged media democratization movements face. As noted above, corporate and state media are hardly likely to lend publicity to a movement that challenges their own legitimacy and power. That suggests an important role for community media in ‘conscientizing’ their constituencies about communication rights and media reform. DMA’s ‘free rider’ problem also means that it typically relies upon volunteer activists and faces the challenge of long-term sustainability. Here too, community media organizations can help, to the extent that they have institutionalized resources – paid staff, networks, associations (like AMARC, the global association of community broadcasters); constituencies, audiences, and supporters or employees who have essential movement-building skills, in strategic communication, research, media production, journalism and/or political lobbying. Community media’s resources may appear minuscule next to global corporate behemoths like Rupert Murdoch’s News International, but they are much greater than those available to many other social movements. The old adage remains true: organized money can only be beaten by organized people, and community media have resources essential to such collective mobilization.

4. *Sense of Identity.* As a movement-nexus built around shifting issues and coalitions, media democratization doesn’t necessarily need the same kind of identity-based solidarity as other movements. But our research suggests that alternative and community media are precisely the sites where DMA comes closest to acquiring a collective sense of belonging to a movement.

We do not mean to suggest that community media should “lend a hand” to democratic media activism, as if it were a form of charitable donation. Rather, community media are already integrally part of a broader and growing process of media democratization. It is a matter of identifying and building upon the synergies and common ground in that broader, and potentially world-transformative, process.

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Footnote

While we draw heavily on the book in this article, we cannot here explore the range of questions addressed by *Remaking Media*. They include the following:

- In light of the social context and influences on media (particularly journalism), what are the main tasks for media democratization, and what openings are available to it? (Chapter 2)
- What are the main strands or types of DMA, and how do they relate to the logics and realms of the 'system' (the bureaucratic or profit-oriented institutions of the state and corporate media) and the 'lifeworld' (everyday culture as a site where 'lived' social relations and meanings are accepted, negotiated or contested)? (Chapter 3)
- Historically, what have social movements contributed to the democratization of society and communication? (Chapter 3)
- What are the political values and commitments of DMA, and what tensions or fault lines may exist between them? How is media democratization framed for different constituencies? (Chapter 4)
- How can contemporary DMA in the North Atlantic be situated historically, in relation to other waves of media democratization? (Chapter 5)
- What can be learned from the trajectories of two of the oldest and most impressive media democracy organizations in the North Atlantic region – San Francisco's Media Alliance, and Britain's Campaign for Press & Broadcasting Freedom (CPBF)? (Chapters 5 & 6).
- What are the main obstacles and challenges, and resources and openings, for successful DMA? What strategic repertoire is being developed? (Chapters 7 & 8)
- How does DMA engage with other movements in a global city like Vancouver? How do activists situate and understand their own work? (Chapters 9 & 10)
- What are the prospects of DMA coalescing into a movement in its own right, alongside those for ecology, human rights, gender equality, or global justice? To what extent would such a movement likely take on a counter-hegemonic character, challenging (rather than merely 'fixing') established social logics, ideologies, and axes of domination, such as those promoted by neoliberal capitalism?