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Democratic media activism through the lens of social movement theory

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Media scholars have extensively critiqued the democratic deficits inherent in a corporate-dominated, highly commercialized media system – its inequalities of access, representation and political/ideological power, its economic and structural integration with globalizing capitalism and consumer culture. Since the mid-1990s, there appears to have been an upsurge of progressive activism within the Anglo-American liberal democracies, aiming to democratize the content, practices and structures of dominant media. But with the exception of some valuable case studies of citizen-based media reform campaigns (e.g. McChesney, 1993; Starr, 2000), and an encouraging recent surge of work on ‘alternative’ media as a site of potentially counter-hegemonic cultural and political practice (e.g. Couldry and Curran, 2003; Downing et al., 2001), there have been relatively few efforts to theorize the grounds for resistance and transformation.

This paper has a twofold focus. First, primarily, it explores what light existing traditions in social movement theory shed upon the contemporary emergence of democratic media activism (DMA) in Anglo-American liberal democracies. What insights about DMA can be teased out from the various formulations? Second, and conversely, based upon our initial readings of movement documents and interviews with activists, we explore whether media activism points to blind spots and potential new directions for social movement theory.

Since 2000, we have conducted interviews with media activists in the UK, the US and Canada. This article draws from a preliminary reading of

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these data, particularly the 54 interviews we conducted with activists in Vancouver (two-thirds of them designated as media activists, one-third designated as 'other' activists with a known interest in the politics of communication) in the fall of 2001. Although our focus is on what sociological theories of social movements have to contribute to an understanding of DMA, we bring in some interview extracts at certain points in the analysis.

In delineating the field, definitions of some commonly but loosely used terms may be helpful. *Media reform* comprises efforts to change any aspect of the media – 'its structures and processes, media employment, the financing of media, content, media law, media ownership, access to media . . .' (*Media Development*, 2004: 2). Typically, media reform has been undertaken by governments and business, and has focused upon state policies towards the communication industries; but groups within civil society have increasingly turned their attention to media as a sphere of political action. So, within civil society, especially in the US since the mid-1990s, we have seen the re-emergence of *media activism* – organized 'grassroots' efforts directed to creating or influencing media practices and strategies, whether as a primary objective, or as a by-product of other campaigns (for example, efforts to change public opinion on environmental issues).

Media reform and activism can be politically conservative or reactionary, in the sense of reinforcing patterns of hierarchy and exclusion. Examples include campaigns by fundamentalist religious groups against gay-positive representations or policies (e.g. the Disney corporation was the target of a campaign against its same-sex partner employee benefits in the US), or media monitoring by 'free market' policy institutes searching for journalistic deviation from their neoliberal agenda. This article, however, concerns media activism that is democratic and progressive – in the sense of seeking a more equitable sharing of political, economic, social, cultural and/or informational resources and status. Such DMA in civil society is a key (though not the only) driving force of *media democratization*, which comprises efforts to change media messages, practices, institutions and contexts (including state communication policies) in a direction that enhances democratic values and subjectivity, as well as equal participation in public discourse and societal decision-making (Hackett, 2000: 64). The concept of media democratization, emphasizing the process, avoids hypostatizing 'democracy' as a fixed and final state of affairs. It also connotes the connection between processes of progressive change in the media and those in other social spheres. Here, it is useful to distinguish between democratization *through* the media (the use of media, whether by governments or civil society actors, to promote democratic goals and processes elsewhere in society), and democratization *of* the media themselves.

We conceptualize democratic media activism as emergent movement praxis. Although 'radical media' of various sorts have lengthy and complicated histories (Downing et al., 2001), most groups active on the issue of media democratization in the UK and US have recent origins in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s.

Media activism appears to have arisen from several social sources, which may speculatively be conceptualized in terms of three concentric circles. At the centre are groups within and around the media industries, groups whose working life or professional specialization may stimulate awareness of the alienation, exploitation and/or constraints on creativity and public information rights generated by a commercialized corporate media system. Such groups as media workers, journalists, independent producers, librarians and communication researchers have already been well represented in media democracy initiatives.

The second circle comprises subordinate social groups, whose lack of social, cultural, economic or political capital is paralleled in the mass-mediated machinery of representation, and whose interests sometimes bring them into conflict with the social order – particularly when they are organized in the form of social movements that need access to public communication in order to pursue their political project.

The outermost circle comprises more diffuse sectors for whom communication policy and practices are not a central concern, but who may occasionally mobilize around perceived threats that commercialized media may pose to humane, non-commodifiable, democratic values. Parents concerned with media impact on the socialization of the young, communities struggling for local access media or (as in Baltimore) billboard-free public space, citizens concerned with the disconnection between democratic and media agendas, and progressive religious groups advocating ethical standards and human values in communication, have all offered evidence of the resistance of the 'life world' to 'system logic', to use Habermasian terms.

Media activists differ not only in their social sources but in their sites and strategies of intervention. Sites of intervention can be mapped in relation to successive stages in the political economy of encoding and decoding of media texts. Provisionally, these include the following: first, the institutional architecture of media organizations, including the technology, funding, control and access to production and distribution; second, the production process within media organizations (including notions of ethics and professionalism, as well as daily routines and relationships with sources); third, the content, or texts, frames, messages and programmes disseminated through that production process; fourth, media audiences, whose attention to and negotiation of the multiple but structured potential meanings of media texts condition the latter's ideological effectivity; and

fifth, the cultural and structural 'environment' of communication institutions, including state policies towards the media. While we do not theoretically endorse a view of 'mass communication' as a linear process, or indeed any rigid distinction between media and society, the above schema helps us to envisage the dimensions of the task of media democratization, and to place different sites of media activism. Some activist groups address the state with agendas for institutional reform, some produce media or try to cultivate more critical audiences, some monitor, critique or intervene in corporate media in efforts to change media frames.

Together, these efforts constitute a variegated, even chaotic, field of collective action. Although some groups advocating media democratization are entities unto themselves, many are interwoven with, or even embedded within, other social movements. For instance, the London-based World Association for Christian Communication, while deeply supportive of the democratization of communication, is also well ensconced within the international peace and social justice ecumenical movement. However, media activist groups tend not to respect existing movement boundaries, but to exceed them, as in IndyMedia, the global network of websites dedicated to open, alternative journalism that grew out of the 1999 protests against the WTO ministerial meeting in Seattle. How are we to understand this form of activism – as a new movement, a new style of politics cutting across movements, or through some other imagery? What is its political significance and potential?

The extant traditions of social movement theory can provide some guidance on these issues, in particular the theories that have been advanced in western Europe and the US during the past three decades. These are typically discussed under the rubric of two paradigms: the mainly American-based resource mobilization approach (RMT) and the mainly European-based theories of new social movements (NSMs). Resource mobilization theory focuses primarily upon *how* movements form and engage in collective action; new social movement formulations focus primarily on *why* specific forms of collective identity and action appeared in late 20th-century Euro-North American societies and on their socio-political significance (Melucci, 1989). By implication, RMT analyses tend to be sensitized to the specific meso-level context, sandwiched between micro and macro, and to the conditions that enable or hinder movement mobilization, while NSM formulations are typically more sensitized to the broad, macro-sociological transformations that have created new contexts for collective-identity formation. RMT offers a conception of movement practice that emphasizes the *shared interests* and forms of *social organization* that underlie and also issue from processes of mobilization as a social group engages in the pursuit of its common interests. NSM theories, in contrast, view movements less as organizations of common interest and more as new forms of *collective identity* engaged in *discursive struggles*

that not only transform people's self-understandings but also contest the legitimacy of received cultural codes and points of view (Cohen, 1985).

In the 1980s and 1990s, these paradigms anchored a raft of empirical analysis of social movements. More recently, as limits have become evident, critiques have appeared to challenge the paradigms. Below we consider the relevance of these paradigms, and of some recent critiques of them, for an understanding of DMA. Our approach to this diverse literature is pragmatic, selective and eclectic: we do not aspire to a grand synthesis but merely to appropriate theoretical insights from the different traditions.

Media activism viewed through the RMT lens

Resource mobilization theory represents social movements as assemblages of 'social movement organizations' (SMOs), each pursuing what Gamson (1990), in an influential study, termed its 'strategy of social protest' vis-à-vis other collective actors, including the state and mass media organizations. In this framework, the question of communications media is posed in instrumental terms. In pursuing collective action an important strategic relation is that between movements and media, as the former attempt to 'get the message out' while the latter strive to maximize profit and market share through capturing audiences. For Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993), this is a relation of *asymmetrical dependency*: movements rely on the media for access to publics much more than media rely on movements for copy. Perhaps the most compelling example of where this dynamic can lead was provided by the 1960s student movement, which enjoyed the short-term benefits and ultimately suffered the longer-term costs of becoming a creature of the media (Calhoun, 1998; Gitlin, 1980). SMOs differ greatly in the kinds of media strategies they deploy, in striving to reduce either asymmetry (as in Greenpeace-style media events that command attention) or dependency (as in the production of alternative media for dissemination among the constituency [Carroll and Ratner, 1999]). On the basis of these observations, we might speculate that an SMO's support for structural media reform is inversely related to its past success in gaining mainstream media standing (validation), and particularly its success in having its preferred frames incorporated into news coverage. For instance, an environmentalist we spoke with felt relatively well served by the existing mass media:

We work hard at getting media, and we get a lot of media. I don't see them deliberately excluding the progressive issues; I don't see them going out of their way to report on them, but they don't go out of their way to report on whatever business issue either, right?

In part because they have worked up the requisite skills and savvy to be effective, in part because their issues often play well, such activists may

not view reform or transformation of media as a priority. On this point we can begin to notice one of a series of key differences between what we might call 'conventional activism' and media activism. The former makes strategic use of the media (whether mainstream or its own) as a means toward some other political end; the latter approaches media as an (at least interim) end in itself. Yet despite this analytical difference, in practice the line between 'conventional' and media activism is indistinct: what media activists do in building alternative media resembles what many conventional movements do in order to redress the problem of dependency. (Indeed, the distinction between alternative media producers and activists from other movements has arguably blurred since the 1970s, given the accessibility of new, cheaper and user-friendly technology like the camcorder and now the internet [Ford and Gil, 2001: 205–6].) There is a difference, however, residing in the distinction between means and ends. For media activism, alternative media are not simply a political instrument but a collective good in themselves, as they short-circuit corporate control of public communication and foster democratic conversations. This brings us to the next theme we want to borrow from RMT.

Beginning with Charles Tilly's seminal work, *From Mobilization to Collective Action* (1978), RMT scholars have paid attention to the emergent shape and form of social activism – the changing *repertoire of collective action*. Strikes, demonstrations, 'media events', culture jamming and the like issue from the tactical innovations of activists as they have responded to changing political and cultural conjunctures, and different SMOs and movements develop distinctive action repertoires as effective means toward realizing their goals and visions. One way of grasping democratic media activism as an emergent field of politics is to attend to its distinctive action repertoire. Our research points to four predominant forms of action to democratize communication:

- (1) influencing content and practices of mainstream media – e.g. finding openings for oppositional voices, media monitoring, campaigns to change specific aspects of representation;
- (2) advocating reform of government policy/regulation of media in order to change the structure and policies of media themselves – e.g. media reform coalitions;
- (3) building independent, democratic and participatory media. Here, we can distinguish between self-management and counter-information traditions within such media (Downing et al., 2001), depending on whether they prioritize the democratic process or the counter-hegemonic textual product of such media. We can also distinguish between the production of alternative media outlets as such, and capacity-building to aid such media (e.g. skills training, distribution services). In either case, this form of action focuses on giving voice to

- the marginalized through communication channels independent of state and corporate control;
- (4) 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 addition of these to the repertoire of collective action in advanced capitalist societies has arguably transformed the strategy of protest movements in general. Culture jamming, media monitoring, internet activism and the like have become familiar techniques in various movements, rendering collective action more reflexive. The key question is whether these four components cohere in an incipient media-democracy movement, or are simply taken up selectively by established movements.

Of course, an incipient movement does not necessarily imply a homogeneous collective actor. Note that the first and second components entail actions directed at the main forms of institutional power over communication – the corporate media and the state; while the third and fourth entail actions directed at civil society, and within civil society, specific publics and communities. 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 prioritize *either* the first or last two of these. This suggests a certain division of labour, and perhaps of political style, within the field of DMA. The different action repertoires of groups such as NewsWatch Canada (promoting fair coverage), the Friends of Canadian Broadcasting (focusing on state policies), Co-op Radio and IndyMedia (building independent media) and AdBusters (promoting more critical audiences) give media activism an *organizational ecology* in which different groups, organized in somewhat different ways and pursuing distinctive agendas, take up and rework the politics of media. This ecology is punctuated not only by differences in action repertoires but, relatedly, by differences in modes of social organization. An insight of RMT is that different kinds of collective action are enabled by different organizational forms, and this is very much what we find with media activism. SMOs that produce alternative media (e.g. in Vancouver, Co-op Radio, Independent Community Television) are often organized along cooperative lines, with many points of contact in the communities they serve. In contrast, AdBusters is organized hierarchically through an elaborate, professionalized division of labour, much like other mass-circulation magazines – a mode that is effective for its project of cultivating a wide cosmopolitan readership. In further contrast, for Guerrilla Media, a direct-action style of culture jamming that may sometimes overreach legal limits (as in the subversive doctoring of billboards) recommends neither a permeable network nor a formal organization but a small clandestine cell within which

trust among activists is maximized. The distinctions in action repertoires and modes of organization underline the fact that media activism is indeed a diverse field of collective action, bringing us to the related issue of *strategic interaction* among collective actors within and beyond that field, with all that entails for their political opportunities.

As noted earlier, one virtue of RMT is its sensitivity to issues of strategy. From Tilly forward, there has been a recognition that various collective actors, not only SMOs but political parties and bodies of the state, are continuously engaged in complex patterns of strategic interaction. The configuration of mobilized social forces – both within the state and in civil society – provides a strategic context within which a given group acts. Tied to this insight is the notion, built into the concept of resource mobilization, that collective action always has its costs (Tilly, 1978). According to RMT, a good deal of strategic interaction involves various instances of *repression* and *facilitation*, as groups influence each other's costs of collective action, whether upwards (repression) or downwards (facilitation) (Tilly, 1978:100–1).

An analysis of these costs can be illuminating in both diachronic and synchronic terms. The long-term trend in affluent capitalist democracies has been noted by Buechler, following McCarthy and Zald (1977):

. . . such nations enjoy an abundance of material resources, organizational technologies, and ideological traditions that foster political opportunities and lower mobilization costs for many different groups. One manifestation of these advantages is the establishment of a permanent, quasi-institutionalized social movement sector. (Buechler, 2002: 25)

Contemporary media activism belongs to that sector.¹ But it has been specifically shaped by the changing cost structure of communication, first with the rise and consolidation of corporate media, more recently with the proliferation of new communications technologies. Much of the impetus for media democratization stems from the historical process through which communication has become increasingly commodified and concentrated within cultural industries organized along corporate-capitalist lines, marginalizing non-corporate actors by erecting massive barriers to entry, and in the process creating a strong basis for grievances about the non-democratic character of mass communication. But, as RMT insists, grievances in themselves do not produce collective action. It was only in the wake of the protest cycle of the 1960s that activists, already mobilized around other injustices, began to campaign against corporate control of mass communication, as in the CPBF (Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom), and to establish alternative media. More recently, a new wave of media activists has taken advantage of innovations in communication technologies such as the internet and hand-held camcorders, which have drastically lowered the costs of certain kinds of communication, affording new

opportunities for media activism.² Relatedly, expertise in communications (in website design, video production, etc.) has developed within the university-educated social strata from which many media activists hail – another crucial resource that lowers the costs of media activism.

What of repression and facilitation? One could point to certain corporate and state initiatives to raise the costs of media activism (the Napster case comes to mind), typically in defence of intellectual property rights. Some of the provisions in the post 9/11 ‘war on terrorism’ can be read long similar lines. But it is on the issue of facilitation that media activism’s somewhat paradoxical specificity stands out. In the first place, activism to democratize communication clearly *lowers costs* for other progressive movements. If media activist groups are successful in their efforts to open up mainstream media to a diversity of voices and to create effective alternative media or literate readers for media of all kinds, the political beneficiaries will be none other than other progressive movements. When successful, media activism produces collective goods for the entire activist sector. For instance, in Vancouver the Pacific Coalition for Alternative Journalism works to develop a cadre of activist-journalists, IndyMedia enables activists of all stripes to create and consume alternative news and commentary, and Tao Communications helps activist groups to set up websites and lists (secure from the threat of state repression). All three facilitate other progressive movements by nurturing or directly supplying the technical expertise to produce media outside the loop of corporate control. In recent years, media activist groups have also begun to facilitate each other’s projects – the leading example being CPBF’s sponsorship of Media Democracy Day, held in Vancouver (and also in other cities) each October.

It would seem to be in every activist’s interest to make democratizing media a top priority. Yet, in the second place and as a variant of the ‘free rider problem’ that RMT has explored at length (Fireman and Gamson, 1979), it is precisely this generically beneficial character that tends to deprive media activism of scarce resources. While all progressive movements would presumably benefit from media democratization, such benefits will accrue regardless of whether a particular group dedicates its own resources to the cause. Given scarce resources, and given that each movement’s immediate priorities lie elsewhere, it is locally rational in the short term for each SMO not to deploy resources into media activism, but to pursue a more circumscribed media strategy. Thus, 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. There is, indeed, a paradoxical asymmetry to the relation between media activism and other forms of activism, which has worked to the disadvantage of the

Left. Media activism thrives, and can only thrive, in conjunction with other democratic movements. As it thrives, it facilitates those movements. But in pursuing their immediate objectives, other movements – whether oriented around ecological or social justice issues – do not necessarily require media activism. Indeed, in a regime of mass communication that has long been dominated by corporate capital, the weight of tradition runs along conventional lines of ‘getting ink’. Even the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, a group consciously committed to media democratization, measures its communicative success primarily in terms of the number of ‘hits’ it receives in the mainstream media. An RMT analysis suggests that, despite the long-term collective benefits of media democratization, the ‘logic of collective action’ tends to work against media activism. However, this holds only so long as the field of activism is fragmented into many single-issue SMOs, each relating to others through an instrumental-utilitarian calculus. As Schwartz and Paul (1992: 214) point out, movements solve the free rider problem by developing a ‘group logic’ that asserts that ‘unless large numbers join the group effort, *nobody* will benefit’. One challenge for democratic media activism, then, is to promote a greater awareness, among various activists, of the importance to all activists of tackling the power of hegemonic media. One might take from this analysis the double-edged strategic lesson that media activism needs (1) to develop an independent resource base for its activities (which implies a heightened consciousness of the importance of such activism), while (2) aligning itself productively with other forms of activism in a manner that demonstrates the practical value of media democratization and that encourages progressive movements to lend tangible support to this project.

Media activism viewed through the NSM theory lens

Alberto Melucci has been perhaps the most celebrated theorist of new social movements. His constructivist approach argues that a movement is ‘always a composite action system, in which widely differing means, ends and forms of solidarity and organization converge in a more or less stable manner’ (1989: 28). Indeed Melucci is adamant in refusing to conceptualize movements as sovereign and coherent collective actors. ‘The empirical unity of a social movement should be seen as a result rather than a starting point,’ he tells us (1996: 40). These observations would seem to apply forcefully to media activism, whose field of action is so densely embedded in the action fields of other movements that no clear claim can be made that media activism (yet) comprises a definite composite action system. The boundaries between media activism and other forms of activism that it often facilitates are constantly blurring.

For Melucci, what is integral to contemporary movements is the construction of *collective identity*, an interactive process that addresses ‘the question of how a collective becomes a collective’ (1996: 84). In post-industrial contexts, essentialist identity claims become problematic as social locations are destabilized and decentered. The unity of collective action now depends on the collective actor’s ability to locate itself within a system of relations; yet this process of identity construction cannot occur independently of the recognition provided by other actors (1996: 73). Melucci’s constructivist perspective has relevance to the status of media activism, which to date may be said to lack a clear collective identity, a shared sense of the unity of its collective action. In our Vancouver interviews we asked our respondents where their activism fitted within the field of contemporary movements, and received a good many nuanced reflections. Very few democratic media activists could put a simple label to their political work. Rather, the tendency was to identify with a diverse range of ‘progressive politics’, to situate oneself within a ‘pro-democracy movement’ (with media activism forming a sort of meta-movement across more issue-specific struggles), or to identify partly with ‘anti-capitalist globalization’ and partly with an ‘alternative media movement’. One respondent commented that:

. . . media activism sort of fills the spaces in between the movements. I guess there is something of an activist media movement, but it’s probably the least coherent of any of the movements. . . . [T]he substance of it exists, but it doesn’t have any sort of identifiable organizational structure or any sort of coherent structure at all. But it can always be found in the spaces in between the other movements.

In part, this weakness in collective identity may signal a strength. Mario Diani has elaborated a ‘relational perspective’ that regards social movements as ‘new’:

. . . to the extent that they draw upon, or generate, new solidarities *and* group memberships which cut across the boundaries of any specific traditional political cleavage, and thus undermine current forms of encapsulation. Accordingly, their impact will be stronger, the more these new types of intersecting circles manage to consolidate over time. (2000: 399)

A great deal of media activism is focused exactly around these sorts of boundary-spanning ventures. If media activism is more about constructing a ‘politics of connections’ than it is about constructing its own composite action system, the lack of clear, regularized collective identity among activists may indicate their success in constructing the intersecting social circles that radical coalition politics requires. In our interviews, we often found that activists for democratizing communication held multiple political identities – with one foot in a movement such as feminism, labour or

environmentalism and another in media activism. This plurality may impede the formation of a distinct collective identity, but at the same time it probably 'contributes to a synergistic development between identity formation and community building in which the development of one feeds the growth of the other' (Barvosa-Carter, 2001: 27). In the networks of activism that criss-cross various groups, media activists may play the role of 'cosmopolitans', spanning different sectors and improving the prospects for counter-hegemonic coalition formation (cf. Carroll and Ratner, 1996). Indeed, one respondent suggested that in the US, an emerging media democracy has functioned as a surrogate for a socialist party of the type that, in early 20th-century Europe, brought together different grievances and constituencies into a common tent, offering a direct critique and attack on the power of capital. This observation opens up several possible avenues to explore. Is there an unwitting negative side to DMA, to the extent that it perhaps displaces more wide-ranging mobilization against the rule of capital? Or, to the contrary, does DMA constitute a politics of connection beyond that offered by other social movements, or by political parties, which some political scientists regard as agents of interest aggregation? Has the rise of DMA correlated with the rise of new social movements, and conversely, the decline of the workers' movement and of socialism as coherent, credible oppositional forces? The experience of Britain's Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom suggests otherwise: as the major media reform group in the UK, the CPBF was created with support within the Labour Party and in the wake of union radicalization and disaffection with corporate media in the late 1970s; its relative decline since the 1980s has been associated with decreasing union militancy and the Labour Party's turn to the right under Tony Blair. On the other hand, media activism in the US has been far more associated with NSMs than with trade unions; two prominent American media reformers regard the relative absence of political parties and labour as the key missing link (McChesney and Nichols, 2002: 127–32).

To return to Melucci's analysis, his more controversial thesis, a revamping of structure-functional systems theory for postmodern times, locates NSMs within the rise of a 'complex society' that has displaced material production (and with it, class) from the centre of social life, and replaced it with the 'production of signs and social relations' (1989: 45). By implication, power is no longer concentrated in a materially dominant class; it is dispersed across the diverse fields of the social and resides in symbolic codes and forms of regulation:

In contemporary societies signs become interchangeable and power operates through the languages and codes which organize the flow of information. Collective action, by the sheer fact of its existence, represents in its very form and models of organization a message broadcast to the rest of society. (Melucci, 1996: 9)

If new social movements are, according to Melucci, distinctive in posing 'symbolic challenges' to the organizing codes of complex, information-rich societies, then DMA is surely located on the cutting edge of such praxis. After all, media activism contests not only the 'codes' of communication but the entire complex of social relations and practices through which the codes are produced and disseminated; and this contestation is matched by the construction of democratic alternatives. On this reading, the democratization of communication would seem to be at the forefront of progressive movement politics in our times.

However, Melucci's conceptualization goes astray as he posits an overly schematic division between the capitalist past, when production was primarily 'material' and class relations formed the axis of conflict centred upon the state, and the post-industrial present, when production is informational and a Foucauldian web of power supplants political economy (Bartholomew and Mayer, 1992).³ As others have pointed out, the idea that circumstances have changed so radically that new social movements now concern themselves with cultural symbols, lifestyle, the everyday and identity is entirely far-fetched – all the more so after a couple of decades of neoliberal retrenchment and growing disparities in the very societies where Melucci seems to envisage a cumulative condition of post-industrial affluence (Mooers and Sears, 1992; Pillion, 1999).⁴ Certainly, our study of the Vancouver scene found that many media activists have not turned away from the state (Melucci, 1996: 102), and that most of them view the concentrated institutional power of corporate capital as a massive obstacle to media democratization, and to democratization more broadly. Indeed, not only have many Vancouver media activists not eschewed state-oriented activism; some of them have moved away from such forms of DMA as culture jamming in favour of involvement in city and provincial politics, convinced that elected office is both important and achievable. Undoubtedly, the energy of new social movements contributed to the sweeping victory of the left-wing COPE party in Vancouver's 2002 civic elections.

If Melucci's culturalist account of NSMs leaves much to be desired, other theorists have advanced more cogent formulations that retain a sensitivity toward the changing political economy of advanced capitalism. Catherine Eschle admits that the new/old distinction, as formulated by Melucci, has not withstood empirical scrutiny (cf. Calhoun, 1993; Carroll and Ratner, 1995). But she concludes:

. . . the 'newness' of contemporary western movements lies in the *political importance* now accorded both to the cultural dimension of activism and to organization in devolved and democratic ways. Movements have also diversified into new arenas of social conflict. (Eschle, 2001: 58)

Media are clearly one of the new arenas, as a 'heightened reflexivity' has developed amid conflicting codes, signs and symbols, undermining traditional rationalizations for social order (Buechler, 2002: 39). However, contrary to Melucci, the tendency has not been for the everyday to *replace* more institutional locales and targets of collective action. Instead, with increasing politicization of everyday life 'all social locations become sites for resistance to power' (Buechler, 2002: 39). Media activism appears, through this lens, as an archetypically *new* social movement: a reflexive form of activism that treats communication as simultaneously means and end of struggle, a movement that sees democratization of communication as a crucial counter-measure against the shifting forms of control and domination that, in collapsing boundaries between public and private, also politicizes the personal. To develop this line of analysis, we turn to the critical theory of Jürgen Habermas.

The theory of communicative action understands late modernity as a configuration of *system and lifeworld* – of macro-structures organized by markets and bureaucracies (system) and of meaningful everyday life within 'the relations and communications between members of a societal community' (lifeworld) (Hewitt, 1993: 62). Both these sides of modernity have been subject to processes of rationalization, but as the system of advanced capitalism has colonized the lifeworld, the instrumental rationality of capitalist and bureaucratic practices has predominated over the communicative rationality, immanent in the lifeworld, that grounds sociality itself. Even so, critical reason grounded in a partially rationalized lifeworld has continued to constitute modernity's counter-culture – 'a permanent opposition to the dominant forms of instrumentality' which has surfaced in such emancipatory social movements as socialism and feminism (Ray, 1993: 81).

In his original formulation, Habermas argued that new movements express a 'silent revolution' in values and attitudes – a shift from the old politics of social and economic security to the new politics of participation, quality of life, individual self-realization and human rights. They seek no material compensation from the welfare state but have to do with 'the grammar of forms of life' (Habermas, 1987: 392). Such concerns can be of a defensive nature, as movements attempt to shield endangered ways of life from further systemic colonization, and here we can note that certain kinds of media activism fit this description – a good example being the struggle for indigenous minority-language television services, which has become a first priority for certain traditional movements (Hourigan, 2001: 93). Other examples include parents' coalitions opposing the use of school classrooms as captive audiences for commercial 'educational' channels. However, although Habermas (1987) has tended to view new social movements as defensive in character, his formulation is especially instructive in thinking about 'emancipatory movements':

. . . those which advance a resolution of the welfare-capitalist crisis which would involve the 'decolonization of the lifeworld'. This would involve the withdrawal of system-integration mechanisms from some aspects of symbolic reproduction; the replacement of (some) normatively secured contexts by communicatively achieved ones; and the development of new participatory-democratic institutions which would regulate markets, bureaucracies and technologies. (Ray, 1993: 62)

Clearly, a great deal of media activism entails just these kinds of emancipatory practices. The very idea of democratizing communication – of creating inclusive dialogues in place of the monological channels of corporate mass media, of advocating a universal 'right to communicate', which implies a responsibility to listen as well as access to the means of public communication (Husband, 1996) – elegantly expresses the aspiration for a decolonized lifeworld.

Cohen and Arato (1992: 548–63) take the formulation a step further in offering a clearer distinction than Habermas does between 'defensive' and 'offensive' modes of movement activism, the former directed inward to civil society and the lifeworld, and the latter outward to state and economic institutions. In this recasting the 'defensive' aspect of activism is by no means conservative. It involves preserving *and developing* the communicative infrastructure of the lifeworld, through redefining identities, reinterpreting norms, developing egalitarian, democratic associational forms and securing '*institutional* changes within civil society that correspond to the new meanings, identities, and norms that are created' (1992: 531). The 'offensive' aspect targets political and economic society – 'the realms of "mediation" between civil society and the subsystems of the administrative state and the economy' (1992: 531–2), and struggles not only for resources and political recognition but for influence vis-a-vis political insiders and for institutional reform. This distinction places the fourfold action repertoire we discussed earlier in a new light, as we see in efforts to bring about state-mandated media reform or to influence the content of mainstream media precisely what Cohen and Arato term the 'offensive' dimension, and in efforts to build alternative media and to create more critical audiences the 'defensive' dimension – remembering that 'defensive' can mean significant transformations in the codes, relations and practices of the lifeworld. Cohen and Arato's point, inspired by Antonio Gramsci's 'dual perspective' on political society and civil society as terrains for progressive politics, is that new social movements face a double political task, and tend to create organizational forms conducive to both defensive and offensive dimensions, as North American feminism did in blending women's-liberationist and liberal reformist currents in the 1970s (1992: 555–6). This is indeed the same task that media activism seems to be facing today.

Habermas's thinking on the public sphere (1989 [1962]), which pre-dates his work on new social movements, provides the basis for a related set of

insights on media activism. What Habermas sees is that the lifeworld exceeds 'everyday life', and that the state does not 'contain' politics. What makes capitalist democracies to some degree democratic is a public sphere, distinct from the machinery of the state and capital, and from the private realm of everyday life, 'a site for the production and circulation of discourses that can in principle be critical of the state' (Fraser, 1997: 70). However, in a social formation wracked by systemic contradictions, the public sphere is not a unified site. It has more the character of a complex of 'interstitial *networks* of individuals and groups acting as citizens' (Emirbayer and Sheller, 1999: 156). Modernity's endemic power inequities have led subordinated groups to create *subaltern counter-publics* – 'parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated groups invent and circulate counter-discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs' (Fraser, 1997: 81). Paralleling Cohen and Arato's favoured example, Fraser cites the late 20th-century feminist counter-public – a field of communicative action involving journals, bookstores, film, lectures, academic programmes, conferences and so on – which also serves as an example of media activism. She goes on to point out that:

. . . in stratified societies, subaltern counter-publics have a dual character. On the one hand, they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics. It is precisely in the dialectic of these two functions that their emancipatory potential resides. This dialectic enables subaltern counterpublics partially to offset . . . the unjust participatory privileges enjoyed by members of dominant social groups in stratified societies. (1997: 82)

This duality presents us with a slightly different view of media activism. On one hand, efforts to build and sustain a specific counter-public – to enrich the communicative practices within a subaltern group or community – make important contributions to communicative democracy by enabling that counter-public to find its political voice. On the other hand, counter-publics must address wider publics, and their ability to do so requires practices that also fall within the ambit of what we have termed democratic media activism. It is worth noting, however, that DMA seems especially prone to 'getting stuck' at the first stage – the building of counter-publics. Many media activists, especially alternative media producers, seem content to create their own media spaces, an activity with its own inherent satisfactions. As one member of a Vancouver independent newspaper collective told Hackett in the early 1990s, so long as his paper could offer an outlet for local creativity and alternative voices, he was quite content to coexist with, rather than to challenge, the corporate media. Since then, the

internet's exponential expansion of opportunities for self-publication, no matter how small and marginalized the audience, has probably exacerbated this tendency.

Fraser's reworking of public sphere theory affords some vantage point on the interdependencies between 'defensive' and 'offensive' modes of media activism. The renovation of civil society entails the creation of counter-publics in dialogue with each other, promoting a democratic political culture. At the same time, 'agitational activities directed toward wider publics' also address 'offensive' issues of public policy and state power. In this duality we find a participatory model of communicative democracy as the institutional organization of public communication to enable all individuals and subcultures to actively participate in constructing public cultural truth (White, 1995), and as the ability of each segment of society to put ideas into circulation, so as to reach all other segments of society (Jakubowicz, 1993).

Conclusion

While both *major* extant traditions in social movement theory offer insights on the dynamics and significance of democratic media activism, this form of collective action also reveals certain problems in conventional thinking. The struggle *within civil society* to democratize communication seems to satisfy certain criteria for social movements. It is based in activist networks and dissident cultures; it employs an extra-parliamentary repertoire of action that requires the mobilization of key resources such as labour and technology; it extends the Enlightenment project of reason and justice, which has animated most modern social movements.

Yet media activism cannot be said to have simply carved a niche for itself within the ecology of contemporary movements. On the one hand, its strategic focus – on communication itself – and its action repertoire – culture jamming, media monitoring, internet activism and the like – are sufficiently novel to have transformed the strategy of protest movements in general, rendering collective action more reflexive. At first glance, it might seem as if this form of activism is simply a paradigmatic example of the 'new' in social movements – the emphasis upon 'challenging the codes' of complex societies and thereby alerting elites to problems that need fixing. Certain kinds of media activism do focus upon issues of content, but, contrary to Melucci's thesis, a good deal of media activism presents not *just* a 'symbolic challenge' to elites but a challenge to the *system of symbolic production* – a critique of the political economy of mass communication and an effort to build democratic alternatives. If the project

to democratize communication is as much about 'economics' as it is about 'culture' we must doubt the veracity of formulations such as Melucci's, in which new social movements take on a culturalist casting in contrast to old movements.

On the other hand, media activism is characteristically embedded in other activist causes, so much so that it seems to be constantly transgressing political boundaries. One result of this is the lack of a clear 'collective identity' – ostensibly the mark of a social movement. Melucci's notion of an action system is helpful here. With media activism the action system, rather than being interiorized in a way that fosters collective identity, is exteriorized through constant engagement with other movements and progressive communities. However, if this form of activism is more about constructing a 'politics of connections' than it is about constructing its own composite action system, the lack of clear, regularized collective identity among activists may indicate their success in constructing the intersecting social circles that radical coalition politics requires. On this issue Diani's more relational perspective on new social movements comes closer to the reality of media activism.

In other ways, media activism problematizes standard conceptions of 'success' in the social-movement literature. RMT analysts especially have tended to equate a movement's success with its absorption into the polity, as an empowered interest group (Scott, 1990; Tilly, 1978). For Melucci, a movement's self-construction, and thus its very existence, is itself a success, as it sends symbolic challenges up to elites. Here, Habermasian theory seems to offer the most insight, in part because of its own democratic normative commitments. If new social movements engage in defensive and offensive struggles for more democratic lifeworlds, including vibrant public spheres, media activism is a sterling example of these politics. Its success will not likely bring it a collective identity or a well-defined niche within the polity or social movement sector. This form of activism may be fated to remain a 'movement in itself', not (consciously) for itself. Its success will consist in making democratic communication a *nexus*, and a conscious priority, for various critical social movements – a nodal point (in Laclau and Mouffe's [1985] terminology) articulating different elements of radical democracy (economic, community-based, multicultural, etc.) into a coherent project informing a revitalized public sphere and capable of winning needed structural changes. If analysts like Buechler (2002) and Tarrow (1998) are correct that globalization of social protest may 'signify a shift from intermittent cycles of protest to a permanently mobilized global society in which movements spread and diffuse around the world at the speed of modern telecommunications' (Buechler, 2002: 25), then democratic media activism will surely play a crucial role in the emerging social formation.

Notes

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1. Of course, quasi-institutionalization of the 'sector' does not imply that the activist groups themselves have become ossified, only that over time there continues to be a broad field of social activism distinct from state institutions, electoral parties and the like.

2. 'It is clear that the Internet significantly lowers entry barriers and other Downsian cost factors for participation in the electronic public sphere. . . . Lowering the economic costs to initiate and sustain an accessible political voice . . . can lower access barriers for minority voices as well' (DiMaggio et al., 2001: 322).

3. The equation of 'industrial' with 'material reality' and 'post-industrial' with codes and information invokes a problematic dualism that ignores the material dimension of culture, including its production and consumption within (predominantly capitalist) social relations.

4. As Barker and Dale, writing in the late 1990s, observe, 'capitalism is revealing a more brutal face. *Contra* NSM theorists of the 1980s, this is no age of affluence, welfare, and increased material security' (1998: 92). The burst of anti-corporate globalization activism that developed in the late 1990s is extremely difficult to reconcile with NSM metanarratives like Melucci's.

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