

Understanding Media of the Voiceless

John D.H. Downing

**Professor Emeritus and Founding Director, Global Media Research Center,
Southern Illinois University**

jdowning@siu.edu

Thank you warmly for your invitation to address the Colloque. I was asked to include an intellectual autobiography of how I came to study nano-media. So I will begin with that.

How I got to study nano-media in the 1960s

I lived in England during the 1960s and 70s, initially in a Northern factory and mining region, but mostly in various working class London neighbourhoods. In 1980 I moved to the USA. I lived in Brooklyn, New York for the first ten years, and now live there again. I taught sociology and then media studies in universities in London, New York, Texas and Illinois.

The crucible of the 1960s and 1970s

While living in London I first became angered by mainstream media, especially news. I lived in immigrant areas, and for four years in east London's docks zone. Sometimes I would find myself shouting at the TV set, or hurling my newspaper to the floor. Why? Often, mainstream news portrayals of people of colour, and of striking workers, were so far from true, and so hostile. These were people I *knew*! But they had almost no public voice. Those who voiced people of colour were overwhelmingly white or, if black, were selected by journalists, not by black communities. Those who voiced

strikers were overwhelmingly top union officials whose lives were a million kilometers from those they spoke for. Yet I knew the people these news programs were representing to be very eloquent about their lives and headaches and dreams.

So, in anger, I investigated TV and press news coverage of people of colour, and strikers, for my thèse ~~de~~ troisième cycle. But this coincided with five momentous upsurges. First, the Vietnamese Tet Offensive in January 1968 in Saigon, which spelled the USA's eventual defeat in South East Asia. Then the April 4th, 1968, assassination of Dr Martin Luther King, and the burning cities that exploded in rage, not least Washington DC itself. Then a racist spasm that drew considerable working class support in Britain in 1968-69, sparked also in April 1968 by a vicious politician, Enoch Powell. Then the events of May-June 1968 in France. Simultaneously, the Prague Spring, eventually crushed by Soviet tanks in August.

Before, during and after this maelstrom, small-scale alternative media exploded - placards, songs, graffiti, newspapers, demonstration chants, photos. Some oppositional views even surfaced in mainstream media. In Czechoslovakia, things went even further still, with mainstream media in the hands of energetic reformers. The Soviet samizdat movement - self-published essays, poems, novels, distributed clandestinely - began its real rise in response to the Czechs' and Slovaks' defeat.

However, I knew almost nothing, at that time, of the stunning wave of social movement nano-media across much of Latin America.

It is very hard to convey the mercurial feeling of those years: the turbulence, the energy, the contradictoriness, the sense of possibility, of opening, of fear, of outrage, of humour. Social movement media, however laughable at times, however short-lived,

however puny, however disorganized, were collectively a crucial sign of life and pushback, glimpses that other worlds were possible.

Wrestling with political negativism

In 1980 I eventually published a much less academic version of my thèse, *The Media Machine*, with a leftist alternative press (Pluto Press). To the existing chapters on labour struggles, and ‘race’, I added two chapters on sexism in mainstream media. But I also included a further chapter on three alternative news media: the British Marxist press (one Eurocommunist daily, two different Trotskyist weeklies).

This chapter on the Marxist newspapers identified, and critiqued, their almost 100% obsession with strikes and labour issues. Other issues and dilemmas facing the majority of the public were off the map. This made my book even more dispiriting – I might almost say ‘downing’ – than the rest of the book’s condemnation of anti-labour, racist and sexist coverage in mainstream media. Was the Marxist press then the *only* imaginable alternative? Shouldn’t we all just die?

I did *not* want my book to encourage political fatalism and apathy. But I couldn’t avoid the grim facts, either. And I did not want to end it on a pious, abstract call for fresh thinking and action.

I had had since 1975 Armand Mattelart’s excellent study of media in Chile during the 1970-73 Popular Unity government, which was one of the first studies including alternative media that had come my way. I was aware of the remarkable student radio station in Athens Polytechnic that in 1973 had briefly fought off Greece’s then military regime. But I wanted working examples from the present, not brave examples quickly

crushed by military force. I knew in general about such media in Portugal's anti-fascist revolution of 1974-76, but no money to go there, and no Portuguese.

So I was excited to get information concerning the explosion of free radio stations in Italy, starting in 1976. I was fortunate to know some Italian activists in London, and through their networks, began to gather enough material for a final chapter. At last, a chapter which did not contribute to doom and gloom for activists! Here were radio stations that operated on low to no budgets, which soundproofed their cabins by nailing cardboard eggboxes to the walls [des boîtes à oeufs en carton clouées aux murs]. Which even had a sense of humour (notably missing from the British Marxist press).

Alternative avenues

This was then the turning point. I felt I had said, not everything that needed saying about mainstream media, but as much as I wanted to say at that point. Many others were doing media analysis, many with excellent results.

What was utterly absent was any detailed attention to understanding alternatives. What had been done to open up the mediasphere to people in general? What were these projects' strengths, their weaknesses? The non-soviet Left was frequently weak in organizational matters [on disait en Angleterre que la gauche était incapable d'organiser ne serait-ce qu'une beuverie dans un pub], so how had these media *kept going*, with low to no budgets for printing, distribution and staffing? How did authority operate? How were decisions made? How were conflicts processed? The boring, but essential stuff.

Other organizational forms had been studied – leftwing parties, trade unions, cooperatives – but socialist media organizations operated in different ways. Especially

those which rejected Lenin's hierarchical, militaristic *Iskra* model in his 1901 booklet *What Is To Be Done?*

So I managed to get a semester free for research – my first in 12 years – and a small grant to enable me to spend April-August 1980 in Portugal and Italy, in order to study the Portuguese alternative media experience from 1974-76, and Italy's very active movement press and radio. These were the most dynamic examples I knew in Europe at the time. I also knew how unlikely movement activists are to pause to maintain archives, write memoirs, evaluate their experiences systematically. For the next wave of activism, I thought it crucial that these Portuguese and Italian experiences – good and bad – should be known. It was urgent. Activists should *not* be always re-inventing the wheel.

So I interviewed journalists who had worked during the revolutionary biennium in Portugal's *República* daily newspaper, and in two radio stations (*Rádio Renascença* and *Rádio Clube Português*). All three were mainstream media which had been taken over by the movement. And then in Italy, I did the same for the newspapers *Il Manifesto* and *Lotta Continua*; *Radio Popolare* in Milano; and *Controradio* in Firenze.

My interest in non-leninist media had an unanticipated and ironic coincidence. In August 1980 I began to write up my research on Portugal and Italy. On August 31st, 1980, in the Lenin shipyards in Gdansk, Poland's Solidarność movement signed an agreement with Poland's Sovietized regime, that began to seriously destabilize Soviet power. (In concert with disparate vectors.) Thus the roles of Polish social movement nano-media in the rise and persistence of Solidarność would be ones I would now add, along with the roles of media in the Prague Spring, to Portuguese and Italian examples. I interviewed Polish and Czech émigré media activists in England and the USA. These

experiences of social movement nano-media were key components of the first version of *Radical Media*, published in 1984 with a small leftist US press (South End Press).

But by now I was spending the first year (of what has ended up as thirty-eight years) in the USA. Having opted to stay to work in New York City, then, more than now, a book on European social movement nano-media would fly like a lead balloon. There had to be case-studies from the USA. So over 1981-83 I assembled chapters on a pioneer radio station, a long-running independent Marxist weekly, a women's labor weekly, a Mohawk Nation newspaper, a Puerto Rican film collective, a magazine produced by Latin America solidarity activists, and a radical film documentary collective. A lot else was going on across the USA, especially anti-nuclear protest, and solidarity activism with Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala, and a bunch of film documentaries emerged out of those movements; but those were my choices.

I tried to focus on problems and failures that could be learned from, as well as successes. The combination seemed essential to me, even though 'management' and 'organization' issues are often found as boring as many of the folk fascinated by them. I like to think my interest in exploring them was essential, not grotesque – if learning how to make movement media stronger is vital.

Binarism...and binarism

However, the global political context was now changing sharply. A second Cold War had emerged between the USA and the USSR, and their respective allies. Incredibly destructive new nuclear weapons were being placed in eastern and western Europe. As in the first Cold War, the rest of the world was urged to join 'the right side'. For the USA's ruling circles, neutrality was almost worse than pro-Sovietism. Murderous,

corrupt regimes (Pinochet in Chile, Videla in Argentina, Mobutu in Congo, Suharto in Indonesia...) were merely 'authoritarian'. The Kremlin said Mengistu's Ethiopia was "progressive nationalist." Tiers-mondiste, I said NO.

It was not difficult to find Western leftists who would tell you that the Soviets had problems, but at least they did not behave around the planet like the USA, with its 700 military bases. For such folk on the left, therefore, Leninist media formats got a pass. Attacking them was to play the CIA's game. As though there could only be *one* serious problem!

My task in writing the first version of *Radical Media*, was, as I saw it, to illustrate as forcefully as I could that this binarism was a miasma, an absurdity. Here were all these examples, from the USA, from Western Europe and Eastern Europe, of media projects that owed little or nothing to capitalist, or Sovietized, or even religious backing, or their organizational styles. We were *not* boxed in!

In my passionate anti-binarism, however, I failed to notice that I had effectively slid into a different binarism! So concerned was I to demonstrate to activists that there were practicable possibilities for media work other than either the capitalist or soviet models, that in the 1984 version of *Radical Media* I wrote as though pointing to an entirely separate, segregated radical-media 'sector'. Sociologically and politically this 100% Either-Or was a delusion. Never stated as such, but it hung in the air, masking the ongoing interactions between all kinds of media, and their users. Across whichever lines.

What I was not proposing, however, was an analysis of all forms of nano-media. The adjective 'radical' and the chapter-contents should have made that evident, but some have discussed the book as though I had never heard of local church or mosque

bulletins, local community weeklies, hobby magazines, high school newspapers, and the whole whirling mass of the world's nano-media.

The first post-modernist book?

Anyway, *Radical Media* appeared. It had been the last item in the contract between South End Press and a Netherlands printer. Relations had grown angry, and the printer shipped *Radical Media* copies across the Atlantic without having done the necessary glue work [sans avoir suffisamment collé les pages de couverture]. Result? You open the book, and pages almost immediately begin to fall out. Before long, you had in front of you the first post-modernist book... a pile of pages which could be read in any order you chose... How would my little archive ever inform media activists of their forebears' and peers' experiences?

Somehow it survived, and actually more than survived. It became as widely known in Canada as in the USA. What is more, the first translation was into Korean. I only learned of this twelve years afterwards, when a Korean student gave me a copy. There were huge and protracted protests in South Korea in the mid-1980s, and apparently the translation fed all kinds of media activism during those years.

South End Press was disinclined to do a revised version of *Radical Media*, so I contracted with a commercial university-sector publisher - so much for binarism! - to bring out a 75% fresh second edition. I kept the material from Italy, Portugal, Poland and the Prague Spring, but shed the US case-studies, except for the radio station. I updated that one, and the Italian radio station chapters.

I extended my focus to a plethora of media beyond print, broadcasting and cinema. I assembled international examples of everything from graffiti and dance, to cartoons and popular song, photomontage and dress, street theatre and murals, and more. Some of my graduate students wrote chapters on video activism in the USA, and radical internet uses. I also reviewed a group of concepts, such as ‘community’, ‘networks’, ‘public sphere’, ‘hegemony’, James Scott’s “weapons of the weak”, which might make sense of social movement media. There was a chapter on the anti-nuclear movement press in Germany and Britain in the 1980s. There was even a short chapter on ultra-rightist ‘alternative’ media. Over time the new *Radical Media* got translated into Brazilian Portuguese, Turkish, and a chunk into Spanish.

New developments

What I had not anticipated was how rapidly this field of study would grow. In 2001, the year my second *Radical Media* appeared, no less than three new books were published: Clemencia Rodríguez’s *Fissures in the Mediascape*; Chris Atton’s *Alternative Media*; and Alfonso Gumucio Dagron’s *Making Waves*, the last-named in English, French and Spanish. That same year, Clemencia and I organized a day seminar in Washington DC, entitled *Our Media, Not Theirs*. We had expected at most 20, but 50-60 showed up. Chris and Alfonso made presentations. It was important, because it brought together Latin American experiences with the emerging anglophone interest.

From 2002 through 2017 OurMedia/Nuestros Medios conferences ran in Spain, Colombia, India, Brazil, Ghana, and Ireland, organized principally by Clemencia. The annual International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR/AIERI) conferences had two Sections, one on Participatory Communication,

the other on Community Communication & Alternative Media. Essay collections began to appear. In 1980 my bookshelf had maybe five items; today, nearly six shelves.

The nano-media projects of the ultra-right was a topic I developed further in one chapter of a co-authored book with Charles Husband in 2005 (*Representing 'Race'*). Given their development since, I sometimes wonder whether I should have spent more time on them, and less on liberation media...

Just one other observation. No sooner was the 1984 *Radical Media* published than nano-media blossomed in the antinuclear movements in then West Germany, Britain, the Netherlands and Italy. No sooner was the 2001 revised *Radical Media* out, than the movements against capitalist globalization began to use the internet to mobilize, and the transnational Independent Media Centers began to flourish. No sooner had my *Encyclopedia of Social Movement Media*, 10 years in the making, finally seen the light of day in 2011, than everybody was talking about Greece, Occupy, los indignados and M15, the upsurges in the Arab region, and social media affordances.

In each case, I kicked myself that I could not include the new developments in my publication. Should I have waited? I always seemed to be one step behind events. But actually, that is deeply encouraging. It showed how the media inventiveness and energy of constructive social movements continue to bubble and ferment.

What I had *never* anticipated was that ultra-rightists would draw on Gramsci's explorations of hegemony to conceptualize their own media strategy...

A word on definitions

So we pass to definitions. Yet mindful as we do so of Alfonso Gumucio Dagron's warning that academics all too easily become so obsessed with arguing about definitions, to a point that they cosily lose sight of the original issues.

I have used the term nano-media more than once, though without defining it. I use it for convenience and provocation. Convenience, because sometimes for simplicity's sake, we need a rapid umbrella designation. Provocation, because it is still the case that small-scale media are quickly dismissed as insignificant because of their size. Yet the impact of nano-*technologies* today is so great. Why casually dismiss the small-scale? "Nano" is a baby reminder of the stupidity of discounting such media. Rather as Herman and Chomsky refer to the alternative press as "the independent media," in order provocatively to dispute capitalist media claims to be "independent".

The problem with the term 'alternative media' is that, in the end, everything is alternative to something else. It risks vacuity. With the term 'community' media, the problem in English – not in other European languages – is that 'community' often carries a nostalgic, harmonious, even insular-local sense, quite other than everyday realities. (I return to 'community media' below.) 'Citizens media', a term pioneered by Clemencia Rodríguez, focuses on the grassroots activist dimension, as contrasted with capitalist media formats.

Les sans-voix

For some, 'media of the voice-less' seems an attractive term. My original impetus for critiquing mainstream media was their normal refusal to allow people of colour,

strikers, women, their voices. There are, however, drawbacks with taking ‘voice’ and ‘voiceless-ness’ as pivotal concepts for defining social justice nano-media.

Who is *listening*? - not in the sense of commercial audience statistics – rather, the volume of people actually engaging with the speaker or subject-matter. Cable and satellite channels, social media, expand opportunities for voice almost limitlessly. But if those listening are a tiny number; or if they are hearing, but not *actively* listening, then nothing much changes. A Tower of Babel.

The issue of active listening, inevitably, leads us back to media users’ ongoing cultural environment: education (in the broadest sense), experience, open-ness, exposure to and confidence in major institutional media, religious influences...

Whose voice? This is also an unasked question, given that the ‘voiceless’ are not a homogeneous mass, sociologically or in opinion. The Front National, the Alternative für Deutschland, the Lega, Britain’s UKIP, and not least the current US president, all claim to voice the voiceless – except the Muslim and migrant voiceless! - and have won mass votes to support their claims. *Their* voiceless are quite often those ditched by capitalism and the sclerosis of established parliamentary parties, not least those of the historic Left. This means that their claim to voice some of the voiceless seems plausible.

Who claims to speak for the subaltern (Gayatri Spivak)? This might be called the leninist party press question – but also the Communication for Social Change school question, as Ferron and Guevara have recently argued.

Other terms

There is still a tapas-menu of terms in play, from counter-information media, to tactical media, to activist media, to underground media, to social justice media. (There is even a commercial media production company calling itself RadicalMedia llc!)

Some terms, such as alternative media or nano-media, have a sweeping, inclusive focus. Others, such as radical or activist or tactical media (Lovink), are more narrowly focused, but especially dwell on content and purpose. In the end, as Chris Atton argues in his *Alternative Media*, we are dealing, not with a random scatter of weird little media projects, but with a whole continent of communicative expression. It is a continent, moreover, where the tidy university bureaucracy compartments of art, communication, education, theatre, music and literature are thrown into confusion. Where they overlap, merge, strike sparks off each other, give birth to each others' children.

Thus, to try to find a single term for this continent of communication is probably ill-advised. For myself, I would suggest that the limited-focus term 'social movement media' has the advantage of locating social justice or activist media – or, if it comes to that, proto-fascist or reactionary religious media – in their social and political matrix. Just as the terms 'capitalist' or 'state' media anchor mainstream media sociologically and financially. Questions about the mutual influence and interpenetration of mainstream and movement spheres are still left open. 'Social movement media' does not presume any form of binary mediaspheres. It simply denies that, notwithstanding the versatility and agility of media forms, their organization is socially free-floating.

(The term 'social movement' has been used, of course, in quite distinct ways: the rational-actor model, the identity politics model, the impassioned mob model, and more. I have explored these elsewhere, but will not pursue that question further here.)

This still leaves at least one question unresolved. The term ‘community media’ is still in very active play (Rennie; Howley x 2; Atton compendium; the *Journal of Alternative and Community Media*; the *Journal of Community Informatics*). Despite the internet’s dissolution of traditional community geography – e.g. Kenyan diasporic websites – the term ‘community media’ anchors the communication very strongly in places and their cultural tapestries. Not at all necessarily in social movements.

By all means, social movements need not be national, or even city-wide, in scale. Mothers mounting a protest to get a traffic-light or crossing installed to protect their children’s safety are a social movement, even when short-run. But much of what we think of as ‘community’ activities is undramatic, ongoing every day. Only when the community in question is habitually extruded from social justice – think of working-class communities of colour in the USA, think of the ongoing plague of police shootings of Black and Latino citizens – do defensive social movements emerge from specific communities. In turn, these communities-in-revolt may and do link up with others.

This is where the specifically English resonance of the term ‘community’ tends to obliterate social class or ‘racial’ differences between and within local communities. ‘Community’ always has a positive ring, eager citizens happily looking out for each other, the whole village raising the child. It is unlike *communautaire*, which tends to imply working class communities – except in phrases such as *repli communautaire*, which points to ethnic exclusivism. In Italian, this ethnic component has come to the fore in denoting non-EU foreigners – *extracomunitari*. In Spanish, *comunitario* still mainly seems to imply working-class community.

Thus the term ‘community media’ tends to be a ‘floating signifier’, at least in English, filled with whatever sense the speaker or writer chooses. Rennie and Howley take it to pinpoint the authenticity and accessibility of locally-generated media, as contrasted with highly polished, out-of-reach, globalized mainstream media, the “culture industry” of Horkheimer and Adorno’s famous essay. But what about local communities at war with themselves? Italian communities angrily rejecting their *extracomunitari* ‘members’, the *repli communautaire*? Or highly gendered communities with entrenched patriarchal codes of behaviour? Would it not be better – at least in English – to avoid the fogginess of ‘community’, and just stick to ‘local’ media? Even then, the local today is less and less of a cultural island...

Let me turn now to four key dimensions of social movement media.

Size, life-cycle and impact

Much of the public’s fascination with media in general is based on the intuition that media have instantaneous impact. Sometimes, indeed, they do. But arguably their impact *over time* in accumulating frames of discourse, hegemonic readings of social reality, socio-ethical priorities, is much more important.

From this perspective, the short lives and size of many social movement media can very easily seem to indicate their lack of significant impact. Ephemeral as butterflies, tiny as sand-flies, they are no *New York Times*, *Le Monde*, BBC. Yet this optic also has a crucial blind spot. Assuming, as it does, that media *organizations*’ continuity generates substantive influence, it overlooks the *functional* continuity of a host of lesser known and barely known media projects.

It took very many decades of anti-slavery media before slavery's 1833 abolition in the 'British' Caribbean, 1863 in the USA, 1888 in Brazil. And still slavery persists to this day <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/series/modern-day-slavery-in-focus/all> Media supporting women's suffrage, feminist media, rights to contraceptive information, another multiple-decade story. Labour media, the same story. Today, if you argue that slavery is OK, or women shouldn't vote, people will urge you to take your medications at once. Yet without the *persistence* of those movements *and* their media, including their peaks and lulls, you would seem perfectly sane.

Thus the time-frame of influence of social movement media, in many instances, needs to be lengthened out from its supposedly short window. These media mostly cannot be studied in the same convenient way that researchers can examine the archives of a newspaper or broadcaster. Today, they are beginning to be archived, for example Brooklyn's Interference Archive [<http://interferencearchive.org/>; <http://www.undergroundpressarchive.us/>; Green, Roediger, Rosemont & Salerno 2016]. But they are scattered, in varying formats (flyers, songs, street-plays, newspapers, videos), quite often produced in the heat of a campaign, then left behind as new campaigns and fresh challenges present themselves. The practical difficulties in studying such media should not, however, govern how we understand them.

Activist media in the fabric of social movements

Capitalist and state media have a very evident social anchoring. Radical activist media, social justice media, are anchored in social movements. Except, of course, that the metaphor of being anchored spins a little out of control, given the frequent volatility and flux associated with social movements. Perhaps if social movements could be

described as the mobile matrix of such media, stretching the matrix metaphor to its uttermost, we could get closer to capturing this reality. Social movement media bounce between financial fragility, intermittency and upsurges.

But the changeability and uncertainty of social movements both feed and are fed by their varying media projects. Capitalist media encourage what Dieter Prokop calls “integrated spontaneity” in their employees, a nice phrase that underscores the limits of spontaneity in those media; in musical terms, encouragement of variations on a theme, without ever discarding the theme. *Managed* change, in other words. But *un-integrated* change, not always strictly revolutionary, is the bread and roses of social movements.

As everyone knows, this means peaks and lulls. During the peaks of intense activism, social movement media of all kinds proliferate, feeding from and feeding into the action. During the lulls, their number diminishes, evidently. Yet movement media operations during the lulls are crucial to maintaining core activist networks, to evaluating the failures and successes of the previous peak, to exploring hitherto unexplored dimensions of the issues. There is time and opportunity – which may fail to be seized, of course - to forge new links, especially today including transnational ones.

Elsewhere I have addressed this checkered intermittency as it bears upon antiwar media over the past century (Downing 2017). Clearly, if the absence of war is taken as the measure of impact, antiwar movement media have been a colossal failure. Even during the era of Cold War nuclear deterrence, superpower proxy wars with conventional means of destruction flourished. Likewise during the 19th century, following the Congress of Vienna, intra-European wars paused for a century, but colonialist savagery blossomed.

But in turn that renders the relative achievements more substantial of the 20th and 21st centuries' ongoing antiwar movements and their media. If labor exploitation, patriarchy, racism, are still with us, despite the centuries of protest and resistance, it is hardly surprising that so is war.

Movement and even at times mainstream media protests were ongoing over decades against saturation bombing, since the infamous aerial attack on Gernika (Guernica) in 1937, memorialized by Picasso; and in that same year, the Japanese aerial assaults on civilians in Nanjing, Shanghai and other Chinese cities. "Carpet" bombing of Hamburg, Köln and Dresden, the nuclear devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, generated their own slow burning horror in the public mind.

Devastating to Iraq as have been the US-led invasions of 1990 and 2003, and the sanctions regime in between, there was no repetition of the daily saturation bombing raids in Viet Nam, Laos and Cambodia thirty years previously. The spectacularly coordinated mass protests across the planet in 2003 at least set a barrier, much higher than before, for how the war could be waged.

These actions finally pushed to the point where military chieftains felt obliged to recommend their weapons for how few civilians would be swept up in the carnage. Their so-called 'smart bombs' and drones still slaughtered far more children than they would admit (Cockburn 2016), but this was nonetheless a sharply different scenario from World War II discussions of bombing. Similarly, despite their being airily dismissed by government functionaries, the widespread international protests against nuclear weapons' 'upgrading' in the 1980s undoubtedly helped lead to the de-escalation of US/USSR stockpiling, and mutual inspections.

The persistence of antiwar movement media over the 20th century has not been without issue, even though a civilized end is still far, far away.

Movement media users within the overall media environment

We come finally to what remains, still, one of the least developed aspects of this field of study: audiences, readers, users. Fifteen years ago now I lamented the vast gaps in our knowledge on this front (Downing 2003), but not much has happened since to fill them up. Yet how can we develop these media further if their operations are so loosely grasped?

The task is not easy. Commercial media generally only have to worry about basic user numbers. Even Hollywood's focus groups are designed to head off box-office disasters, not to explore the complex tissue of audiences' interpretations. But for social movement media users, a much deeper understanding is needed of how they/we process the content. Moreover, the range of social movement media formats – graffiti, street theatre, popular song, dress, cartoons - is incomparably wider than commercial print, broadcast and cinema. Yet the mesh of influence involves both mainstream and social movement media in a simultaneous dialectic.

To emphasize further the complexity of studying users, let me please cite from that same 2003 article, where I instanced international solidarity movement media. “There are likely to be at least four audiences, each one using the movements' media and press releases/conferences in very varying contexts. One is the solidarity movement itself [in the Global North], often operating... under police surveillance but permitted open activity. The second is the opposition movement in the nation or nations with whom solidarity is expressed... The third is the foreign regime and its embassies, or the

transnational corporations, or both, against whom the movement is protesting. The fourth is the domestic government and corporate elite, which may have a variety of interests in play in the countries with whose publics human rights movements are acting in solidarity... We also need to acknowledge both the boost to political prisoners, and the frequent overflow of political activism among the solidarity militants on to associated political issues.”

Very few readers, listeners, viewers or digital media users pay attention solely to social movement media. Available media voices all exist within a tangle of simultaneous speech. Antonio Gramsci once described the average person as having two contradictory awarenesses, the one seemingly docile, formed by the routines of everyday communication in capitalist society, the other submerged but contestatory, emerging usually only in times of crisis.

While it is likely that for those rarely using social movement media, Gramsci’s sense of a normal unity in people’s thinking is valid, reality for habitual users of social movement media is not. There will always be an ongoing dialogue, internal or shared with others, between mainstream and movement media frames.

Sometimes, however, the relationship of movement to mainstream media can be pushed to a binary extreme. The notion of ‘counter-information’ media promulgated by the late Pio Baldelli (1977) and others sometimes risks elevating the, certainly necessary, critique of mainstream media news to the primary task of movement media. But however insightful the critiques generated, this risks remaining inside the mainstream agenda, locked into its territory rather than exploring entirely fresh and constructive possibilities. They lead, we follow (albeit complaining as loudly as we can). Not so good.

A key further contrast with mainstream media users, however, is that movement activists are engagés. Politically inactive mainstream media users, obviously not. This means that movement media are ‘feeding’ activists, which necessarily bumps up the impact of these media, as contrasted with mainstream media impact on unengaged, uncommitted users. If we are seeking to grasp the roles and impacts of movement media, this user-difference is vital.

A final point under this heading: as my journey into British Marxist newspapers of the 1970s showed me, the imagination was generally *not* in power. Their language was routinized, correct, and soporific. One Italian cartoon, during a major public debate about legalizing marijuana, showed a very bored, boring-looking man. He was selling *L’Unità*, the Italian Communist Party daily, and saying “We Communists don’t need drugging. We have *L’Unità*...” Yet one reason, arguably, for the success of rightist media tycoon Rupert Murdoch’s Fox TV channel in the USA was its lively, no-holds-barred language, a total change from the plastic news formulas of the other mainstream channels. A tragedy that this vivacity was harnessed to such destructive purposes.

To be doctrinally correct, is *never* enough.

Transnational social movement digital media vistas

Whether Mexican Zapatista activists and their solidarity activists in the 1990s and 2000s (Ferron ~~2013~~2015), Iranian activists at home and abroad during highly contested elections in 2009 (Sreberny & Khiabany 2011), transnational Tunisian bloggers in the years leading up to the revolution of 2011 (Zayani 2016), the Indymedia network (Wolfson 2014), or countless other projects and moments, activists have seized on the internet and the Web all across the planet.

Early giddy enthusiasm for the affordances of these fresh media was subjected to a very icy shower as their surveillance possibilities became clearer and clearer, following the emergence of Wikileaks, and then the revelations of former CIA contractor Edward Snowden. China's Great Firewall, the further revelations in 2018 of Facebook's dismissive attitude to its users' control of their own metadata, and the deployment of Twitter by President Trump to sustain his base, were reminders that a brave new world was far from having arrived!

Nonetheless, and despite the substantial language-barriers facing full-scale international movement exchange, there has certainly been a monumental expansion of low-cost transnational communication. It is instructive to contrast the communication affordances of what Håkan Thörn (2006) has called the first transnational social movement, namely the global anti-*apartheid* movement. No internet, no cell phones, no radio or TV access inside South Africa itself (an African National Congress station was eventually set up in Lusaka, Zambia's capital, but was often jammed, and listening carried an 8-year prison term), no anti-*apartheid* content of any kind in the press. It should not be forgotten, in the age of the Snowden internet revelations, that one of the most effective barriers to peaceful change in *apartheid*-era South Africa, was the maintenance of a very extensive informer-network.

Over four decades the movement had remarkable impact – along with other vectors (especially the Soviet collapse, itself aided by samizdat media). Nonetheless, the anti-*apartheid* movement deployed face-to-face communication inside South Africa. It cultivated sympathetic mainstream journalists overseas, especially in Britain, the USA and the Netherlands. It maintained individual (mostly White) activists' foreign travel

and political exiles, to act as personal ambassadors to solidarity groups. And it organized spectacular anti-*apartheid* events and demonstrations in foreign capitals, especially to boycott South African products and sporting visits.

This process was painfully slow. Many people's lives were cut short, or permanently damaged, during those four decades of the anti-*apartheid* movement's global struggle. Even after victory, three hundred years of colonial repression will take a long while to reverse. Would things have moved faster with global internet access, with YouTube? Would mobilizations have moved more speedily with 2G and 3G cell phones?

When Lisa Brooten and I (2008) examined the uses of newer connective technologies within social movements, we focused almost entirely on their mobilizing affordances. Ten years later, this feels short-sighted. While pursuing social justice and challenging power are permanently vital, expecting decisive and irreversible – and constructive! - change in economic and political structures on the basis of a single mighty sweep, however costly, however well-designed, is to marry a chimera. To develop change over a *longue durée*, demands we develop workable, imaginable public policies for a globalized planet, and affectively visceral visions bundling them together, with imagination in power (Papacharissi 2014).

If we are to develop 'our' media to *nurse* movement practice for the *longue durée*, and to transcend our fixation upon immediate impact in times of turbulence, then developing many forms of networked, non-sectarian debate is agenda item #1.

Conclusion

My conclusion is simple. We have enormous tasks ahead in this field, and how well we perform them will probably make a serious difference to the effectiveness of social movement media in pushing toward other, and better, worlds. Realistically, those with time permitted by their jobs to do this research will largely be university and college professionals, labour union research departments, and the precariat. All the more vital, then, that the research process proceeds in the spirit of Paulo Freire's dialogic education, in a continuous *active listening* process.

“The years before a conflict never receive the micro-scrutiny
But the fuses are then lit for future upheaval and mutiny
Because small events in corners no one cares to see as critical
Become defining moments, later underlined as pivotal.”

Gil Scott-Heron, African American poet and musician