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Robert Hackett [a] & Megan Adam [b]

[a] Associate professor, School of Communication, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC, V5A 1S6, Canada E-mail:

[b] Senior undergraduate student, School of Communication, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC, V5A 1S6, Canada E-mail:

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Is Media Democratization a Social Movement?

Robert Hackett and Megan Adam

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As media markets are becoming globalized, as the public service ethos is displaced by hyper-commercialism, and as media ownership falls into the hands of fewer and fewer multinational conglomerates, the prospects for the media system supporting a progressive and democratic political culture are becoming dimmer. Many people in the U.S. and other countries know the limitations of the commercialized corporate media, and the systematic ways the media system blocks progressive social change—progressive in the broad sense of a project of sharing material wealth, cultural status and political power. In response, a new kind of social movement may be emerging—a movement that seeks to transform the media themselves.

Efforts to democratize the media date back at least as far as the debates over the New World Information Order in the 1970s. Since the 1980s, however, these efforts have been more diverse, on the local, national and international levels. They include public access and alternative media organizations, distribution networks for independent media, media resource centers to support community organizing and political activism, media monitoring and "watchdog" institutes and journals, ad hoc campaigns to influence dominant media, policy advocacy groups concerned with communications issues, professional organizations and trade unions representing journalists and other media workers, and "culture jammers" who try to satirize and denaturalize the dominant media's representations.

Organizations are also emerging with explicit and even broader mandates to build a movement for democratizing the media. One of the earliest and most important is Britain's Campaign for Press & Broadcasting Freedom (CPBF), founded in 1979 by trade union and Labor Party activists to develop policy and mobilize political support for media reform. In 1996, a Canadian counterpart to CPBF was formed by the Council of Canadians and by media unions in response to unprecedented national press concentration. In the U.S., recent initiatives include the Cultural Environment Movement, launched in 1991 by communication scholar George Gerbner. This Movement had a founding conference in St. Louis in 1996, and two important Media & Democracy Congresses, held in San Francisco in 1996 and in New York in 1997, sponsored by the Institute for Alternative Journalism.

The big unanswered question is whether these initiatives can cohere into a

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critical mass and produce the momentum needed to change the media system. Is there really an emerging social movement for media democratization? What would be the most fruitful strategies to sustain such a movement? What obstacles must it overcome?

These questions inspired a pilot study on activists' perceptions of media democratization. Two groups of activists were surveyed. Fifteen individuals were interviewed in San Francisco during June 1998. Another group of 19 respondents completed a one-page written questionnaire distributed at the June 1998 San Francisco conference of the Union for Democratic Communication. Our respondents included communication scholars, alternative and mainstream media producers, community organizers, researchers and writers, and those who train advocacy groups in media skills or conduct communication campaigns for them. Although the individuals and organizations represented here constitute a wide range of media criticism, media activist and alternative media groups, they are not a statistically representative sample. Instead, we offer a preliminary take, rather than the final word, on the "state of opinion" of a significant cross-section of activists.

The media democratization questionnaire had six categories, and asked: First, what is your main role in relation to media and democracy? Do you think of your own media-related work as part of a bigger picture, for example, as part of a democratization process? Second, are the current U.S. media sufficiently democratic? If not, how should they be changed? Third, do the various progressive media-related initiatives cohere into a distinct social movement for media democratization? Fourth, what are the main factors that (could) facilitate such a movement? Fifth, what are the main factors constraining such a movement? And sixth, what is the most urgent priority for people and groups who want to democratize the media?

Most of the respondents interviewed related their media work to a larger political picture, although some preferred concepts other than democratization—such as liberation, diversity, access, social change, inclusion, interconnectedness, education, and empowerment. The most interesting contrast was that between "insider" and "outsider" strategies for change. For example, in recent years, San Francisco's Media Alliance has moved towards critiquing and sometimes even protesting against the media from an explicitly progressive viewpoint. The challenge, as its executive director noted, is how to do that without burning bridges with working journalists. By contrast, the Center for the Integration and Improvement of Journalism is "trying to do something from within"—by promoting increased diversity in newsroom hiring, for instance. Similarly, GLAAD works with major media corporations, like Disney, to promote positive media images of gay people.

Respondents unanimously agreed that America's media system is not sufficiently democratic. Most attributed this to fundamental structural problems, pointing to concentrated industry ownership, commercial interests overriding public interests, and biased government regulatory practices. Some linked it to

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the weakness of democratic values and institutions in the broader political culture.

Activists pursuing "insider" strategies were the least likely to volunteer critiques of media structure, but even they usually supported structural change. Most definitions of change stressed the need for better public access to media forums, and conversely, the need for media accountability to communities and the public. Some, but not all, respondents tied these goals to reducing the pressures of commercialization.

Many respondents want to use anti-trust law to break down the large corporations that dominate the media. Other options included more government funding for public media, a new or reformed broadcasting regulatory body that would be elected, accountable and representative, and a larger, less elitist alternative press. A central theme throughout all the responses was the need for more representative diversity in both employment and content in the media overall, as the core meaning of media democratization. Usually, diversity is taken to refer to culture and ethnicity, but some pointed to its political dimension as well.

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In contrast to their support for change, most respondents felt either that there was not currently a media democratization movement, or that while the groundwork for a movement is being built, it was not yet a cohesive force. With brutal realism, one prominent communication specialist claimed that the lack of opposition to broadcasting deregulation and to the giveaway of the digital TV spectrum showed that "there's no coherent social change effort focused on the media."

There are many grassroots and progressive initiatives, respondents noted, but little coordination or even contact between them. Indeed, some animosity was evident in the responses. One respondent wrote of a division between genuinely grassroots groups like minority organizations or the micro-radio movement on the one hand, and the "established" or "elite" alternative media on the other—implying that the alternative as well as corporate media need to be democratized.

Another activist described this tension in different terms, from the other side of the fence, as one "between those who want to expand the audience for independent media and use the corporate media or PBS to do that," versus "people who are more radical who want to reach the already converted and use their media to mobilize the troops and avoid what they perceive as watering down the product"—implying that the latter approach is a hindrance to building broader and more effective coalitions. While we did not probe further in this pilot study, we suspect that such divisions overlap with the broader tensions between gender-based and ethnic-based emancipation struggles (sometimes taken as "identity politics"), on the one hand, and the "universalizing" politics of the traditional (white? class-oriented?) left, on the other.

None of the respondents sought a media democratization movement divorced from broader political and social objectives. Many noted that such a movement could not stand on its own, since most people would regard media reform as secondary to other more pressing objectives. Thus, such a project must be linked

to other progressive movements. As Norman Solomon put it, "The battle for democratic media is a subset of the battle for democratic politics."

What opportunities and openings exist for a media and democracy movement? That question seemed to be the most difficult one to answer. Relatively few respondents identified openings and some responses to this question were negative, attacking other organizations' and individuals' strategies. Generally, however, the capacity to gather and disseminate alternative or oppositional information was seen as a definite strength. This was linked to the fact that so many media and democracy advocates are academics or researchers by profession. In this task, the Internet was seen as a helpful new tool in facilitating contact between different activist groups, and in spreading the flow of counter-information to broader publics.

Increasing public cynicism about the dominant media was also seen as a promising point of intervention. Some activists have also found success in exploiting the rivalry between different media, though concentrated and conglomerate ownership are making these openings harder to find. Others have been able to capture media attention for particular issues in which they are involved—for example, challenging the dominant ideology on public health values can give you a hearing you would not otherwise enjoy, said one respondent.

Several respondents saw the media democracy movement as laying the groundwork for a transformative breakthrough that could be sparked by an acute political and economic crisis, or by other unpredictable circumstances. As George Gerbner noted, who would have predicted beforehand the sudden collapse of South African apartheid?

In contrast, obstacles to the growth of a media and democracy movement were much easier to identify. Not surprisingly, one of the most central concerns was the lack of financial resources. Progressive media activists lack money compared to corporate media and right-wing causes, which receive backing from wealthy sponsors. Respondents noted that too much organizing energy is absorbed in preparing the next funding application.

The fragmentation and weakness of left-wing politics in the U.S. overall was also seen as crucial. Many respondents linked the strength and limits of media democratization to progressive movements in general.

As with most social movements, personal rivalries and organizational territoriality—including the competition for funding and public profile—also play a role. The most important divide seems to be that between the "alternative media elite" and those who view themselves as grassroots activists, as noted above.

Respondents also mentioned as a serious obstacle the lack of importance media issues have for many people. Media are at best a secondary issue for most people, including even progressive political activists. Indeed, over the past two decades, the American left has paid a good deal less attention to media work than has the right. One media activist noted in frustration that some groups working on other issues, such as gay rights or environmentalism, may be

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temporarily motivated by perceptions of hostile media bias to work for media reform—but when media coverage of their particular group or issue improves even in modest ways, media reform drops far down on their agenda.

Respondents also mentioned the problem of building alliances with mainstream media workers as an obstacle. Although it would seem that mainstream news workers, threatened with downsizing and the decline of independent public-service oriented journalism, would be natural allies, they are unwilling—with some admirable expectations—to rock the corporate boat. The problematic, but far from dead, "regime of objectivity" also makes them unwilling to be associated with any explicitly political project, especially one like the media democracy movement, which challenges conventional wisdom and established power even on the left.

The relative shortage of inspiring, workable models of mass-oriented progressive or independent media in the U.S. was also noted. PBS and National Public Radio have increasingly been domesticated by growing reliance on corporate funding and by political pressure from the right, and these once public media are sometimes now viewed as part of the problem. There seemed to be a general lack of vision of an alternative, less commercial, more democratic media system that could be at the center of public life, such as those tax-supported but independent public broadcasting, mandated free-time access, election expense ceilings, or press subsidy systems that have been developed in Canada and in the liberal-democratic countries of western Europe.

Respondents also noted the strength of media corporations as political foes, in terms of publicity. If dominant media are reluctant to criticize other businesses, they have taken a veritable vow of silence regarding fundamental (as distinct from ritualistic and superficial) critiques of their own biases and power. For most movements, media exposure is often an important aid to mobilization; for obvious reasons, this resource is less likely to be available to a media reform movement.

Given these grim realities as well as the diversity of approaches to media activism taken by respondents, it is not surprising that there were different views on what constitutes the most urgent priority in building a media democracy movement. Answers were clustered into several groups, however.

One important distinction in priorities came from the "insider" and "outsider" strategy opposition noted above. Insider strategic priorities included getting more working journalists involved in raising issues of editorial integrity in the name of traditional professional values. In this last regard, Robert Bray pointed to the success of the National Lesbian & Gay Journalists Association in educating its own members, extending their focus beyond their understandable concern with the representation of gays in media newsrooms and coverage, to consider the influence of corporate ownership on these problems. By contrast, outsider strategists mentioned attempts to pressure the media from outside mainstream media organizations as a priority.

A second, related distinction in strategy was that between the struggle to influence media content, on the one hand, and the attempt to reform or

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refashion the structure of media institutions, and media policy, on the other. The Public Media Center's efforts to promote progressive causes through public information and advocacy campaigns illustrates the content-based approach. Many other groups are similarly involved in finding and using the "holes in the walls" of existing media for progressive messaging—and training progressive activists to improve their media/communication skills.

By contrast, proposals for a constitutional challenge to the Telecommunications Act could be considered an attempt to reform the structure rather than the specific contents of media. Likewise, the National Lawyers Guild's efforts, through its Committee on Democratic Communication, to end government repression of micro-radio is an attempt to change the media's policy environment.

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The content-oriented and structure/policy-oriented strategies are not, in principle, mutually exclusive. But activists' energies and resources are limited, and their perceptions of what is most urgent and possible differ; so in practice it is often necessary to prioritize one approach over the other.

A third distinction in strategy that emerged was that between inward-focused and outward-focused strategies. Some respondents argued that progressive activists should first mend their own fences—"rediscover coalition and co-operation," unite, engage in dialogue within the movement, and involve more people, including ethnic minorities, who are traditionally underrepresented in the dominant media. Others looked outward, focusing on the need to spread the message—to show that media bias really does make a difference to issues that people care about. Some spoke in terms of political coalition building, for example, spreading media activism to other activists, and even building a Popular Front that would take on media control as well as other progressive issues, with the support of a new, national, popular left press. Strengthening the established alternative media and creating new media were two related options.

How can the resources to build such new media and broader coalitions be unlocked? Several respondents mentioned organized labor as the key. Funding from the United Auto Workers helped to buy the United Broadcasting Network, whose 100 stations broadcast Jim Hightower, a progressive populist commentator. Certainly labor support has been crucial in sustaining the CPBF in Britain, and launching a similar initiative in Canada.

The top priority in movement building, however, as several respondents noted, may be a campaign around limited but important objectives that are winnable, and that can engage a broad coalition of people. As Don Hazen of the Institute for Alternative Journalism noted, it will be hard to develop a media and democracy movement unless there is a clear path to change. "People know there's a problem, but they won't waste time on a futile exercise," he said.

The immediate challenge for the media democratization movement is to identify such a campaign. Several respondents suggested a national campaign to repeal the Telecommunications Act, a project that could certainly bring together a range of different groups. Another, more immediate middle-level

option was proposed by John Anner—local campaigns to wrest back control of PBS stations from unaccountable upper-middle-class boards, and to transform them into voices for the community.

Most people agreed that the momentum of a social movement can build upon initially small but real successes. The key challenge for the emerging media democratization movement is to find those small successes and to build them into a movement, and to do so while drawing on the strengths rather than the potential divisiveness, of the movement's diversity.

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Survey and Interview Respondents

Respondents and organizations represented in the survey and interviews include: John Anner, Independent Press Association; Bernadette Barker-Plummer, Union for Democratic Communication and University of San Francisco; Andrea Buffa, Executive Director, Media Alliance; Robert Bray, SPIN project, Institute for Alternative Journalism; Lori Dorfman, Berkeley Media Studies Group; Peter Franck, Committee on Democratic Communication, National Lawyers Guild; George Gerbner, Cultural Environment Movement; Herbert Chao Gunther, Public Media Center; Don Hazen, Institute for Alternative Journalism; Linda Jue, Fernando Quintero and Yvan Roman, Center for the Integration and Improvement of Journalism; Don Romesburg, Gay & Lesbian Alliance against Defamation (GLAAD); Norman Solomon, media critic and writer who helped found the Institute for Public Accuracy; Mike Budd, James Compton, Norman Cowie, Daniel del Solar, Carlos Fontes, Dee Dee Halleck, Dave Lippman, Brian Murphy, Eleanor Novek, Peter Phillips, Laura Stein, James F. Tracey, Yuezhi Zhao, and others who chose to remain anonymous.

Robert Hackett is an associate professor, and co-director of NewsWatch Canada, a project to monitor blindspots in Canada's press. Megan Adam is a senior undergraduate student. Both are in the School of Communication, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC, V5A 1S6, Canada. E-mail: hackett@sfu.ca meadam@sfu.ca

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