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Media Alternatives and Social Movements: Quebec 1960-1980

by

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RÉSUMÉ

L'évolution d'une attitude critique envers les mass média amena les mouvements sociaux d'opposition du Québec de 1960 à 1980 à adopter de nouveaux types de pratiques communicationnelles. L'analyse des expériences autant typiques qu'exceptionnelles de cette époque met en relief la nature sociale de la communication en tant que site de la lutte idéologique. Les tentatives de création de média dits alternes, l'intervention directe dans le procès communicationnel par les militants impliqués dans des crises sociales et politiques, la question des utilisations traditionnelles des média et des groupes opposés aux autorités constituées, l'interrogation du rôle des média dominants à cause de conflits à l'intérieur des institutions médiatiques elles-mêmes, constituent autant de points de rencontre entre les média et les mouvements sociaux qui nous mènent à conclure que l'avancement de vues sociales différentes ne peut résulter que d'une approche à la communication qui soit dialectique, dynamique et multiple.
INTRODUCTION

This paper is based on a recently-concluded MA thesis which examined the relationship between media and social movements in Quebec during the 1960s and 1970s. The social history of this particularly agitated period for Quebec society was reviewed from a communication perspective, revealing the social nature of communication as a focus of ideological struggle. The importance, or "enjeu" of communication for social and political movements attempting to swim against dominant currents was shown to consist of several different aspects: first, the development of a critical attitude towards mass media on the part of opposition social movements (primarily labor, community and nationalist groups) was seen to go hand in hand with evolution of these movements' broader social perspectives. Second, emerging from this critical attitude was a whole range of new types of communication practices: efforts to set up so-called "alternative" media, direct intervention in the communication process by activists involved in social and political crises, attempts to gain access to mainstream media, and conflicts within the media institutions themselves. Detailed examination of concrete cases of each of these types of communication situations led to an over-all conclusion that various elements like media consciousness, communication strategies and professional struggles of media workers are all part of a single communication problematic, and that promotion of social alternatives must be linked to a multi-faceted approach to communication. Consequently, the notion "media alternatives," referring to a seemingly disparate set of alternative communication practices, is suggested here as preferable to the more limited and restrictive "alternative media." We can thus underscore the importance of such otherwise neglected areas as the professional struggles of journalists working in mass media institutions, and the conscious or unconscious communication strategies of political organizations. Finally, it is argued that the question of diffusing alternative social views is a cultural one and can not be reduced to a transmission problem.

THE SOCIO-HISTORIC CONTEXT

The period beginning in 1960 has been one of intense social and political activity in Quebec. Coming out of a prolonged period where social life was dominated by proponents of a clerical, conservative ideology, the province "opened up" following the death of its premier, Maurice Duplessis, in September 1959. The election, in 1960, of a new Liberal government ushered in an era which has come to be known as the "Quiet Revolution," referring to the social and structural changes which Quebec society underwent. But since the Quiet Revolution was an officially sanctioned modernization which basically aimed to bring Quebec up to the level of the rest of the advanced industrial world, it quickly generated its own internal opposition among youth, labor, and nationalist elements. As early as 1963, this new opposition gave rise to serious, radical forms of expression: the Front de Libération du Québec (FLQ), new approaches to traditional urban community organizing and, most important for our purposes here, the launching of new forms of intellectual and cultural expression exemplified by the radical political journal, Parti Pris.

Quebec's mainstream mass media played a significant role in both the modernization of the early 1960s and the insipient opposition which began to take shape by the middle of the decade. Nearly every major media institution underwent internal shake-up between 1958 and 1967. Major strikes at La Presse (1958) and Radio-Canada (1958-59) heralded the broader social changes then in gestation. In general, progressive social forces saw the media as allies in creating the social consensus then being forged in favor of social change, and the media generally acceded to play the appointed role.

By 1964, however, a gap appeared between what can be termed the broader social movement agitating for change, and the political power base represented by the Quebec Liberal Party and the modern State it was in the process of building. The cracks in the consensus were most evident in the events surrounding La Presse, then the most important newspaper in Quebec. The Montreal daily had been a strong advocate of the Quiet Revolution and the Liberal Party, with which it shared institutional ties as well as political affinities. When criticism of the government accelerated in 1964, political pressure was put on La Presse to side with the regime, provoking serious problems among the paper's working journalists. Particularly important was the refusal of the La Presse editor, Gérard Pelletier, to put reins on the team of political reporters he had created during the preceding few years. In September, using the pretext of a typesetters' strike, La Presse closed its doors, locking out the journalists. The lockout lasted seven months, during which time it became evident that the ties between the political and publishing elites would dominate over any
tendencies the media might appear to have in favor of a movement for social change. In March 1963, when Le Presse resumed publishing, the winds of change had definitely settled. Pelletier was fired as editor and the unruly political reporting staff was reined in. Later, the conflict would be cited as marking the end of the Quiet Revolution.5

Meanwhile, the critical spirit was generating its own autonomous forms of expression and cultural transmission. Since 1950, various small but influential magazines had published in Quebec, notably Cite Libre which numbered among its editors one P.E. Trudeau as well as the journalist Pelletier. Cite Libre had been one of the bulwarks of opposition to traditional Quebec conservatism and, by extension, a supporter of the Liberal reforms of the early 1960's. It also strongly opposed any notion of Quebec nationalism, however, leading its most prominent members into federal politics in 1963. Meanwhile, to the left, the new journal Parti Pris took its place, lighting a spark among Quebec youth.6

Published essentially by a group of university students, Parti Pris described itself as independentist, socialist and anti-clerical. It was the first major manifestation of a radical social current to the left of the Quebec Liberal Federation, linking for the first time the notions of independence and socialism, and putting both in the perspective of the social reforms so important to the mainstream of the Quebec population.

With the appearance of Parti Pris, radical notions were for the first time associated with the immediate concerns of the broad constituency to which they were addressed. Parti Pris represented a rupture with the preceding generations of intellectuals, dominated by the Cite Libre group but, at the same time, its social concerns separated it from the dominant current of the emerging independence movement, while its sharp critique of the Quiet Revolution placed it in advance of other sectors such as the labor movement, for example. Parti Pris was, in the words of one commentator, "truly a 60's phenomenon. It is a fitting example of the arrival on the political scene of the youth of the Western nations. In the particular situation of Quebec, it was the incarnation of a new emerging society resplendent with contradictions, exploding all over the place."7

Other groups and publications soon came along. In September 1964, sociologist Charles Gagnon and journalist Pierre Vallieres launched Revolution Quebecoise, which immediately undertook a polemic with Parti Pris, attacking it from the left. The review was short-lived and its members joined Parti Pris in 1963. Just as the journal was getting involved in an ill-fated political organizing effort, setting up the Mouvement de Liberation Populaire (MLP), one of the first organizations of what would later be termed the "extreme Left." The often arcane political debates of the times would characterize left-wing political activity in Quebec at least through the end of the 1970's.

Meanwhile, another group of intellectuals, largely academics, set up their own journal, Socialisme, which would publish until the early 1970's, laying the foundations of a uniquely Quebecois Marxist sociology. Much of the Marxist sociography produced in Quebec today, in fact, has its origins in the analytical articles published by Socialisme between 1965 and 1971.8

The political situation took a dramatic turn in 1966 with the ouster of the Liberals and the return to power of Duplessis' party, the Union Nationale. Not beholden to the labor movement or the liberal progressives who had helped put the Liberals in power, the UN could move to hem in militant unions, tone down outspoken nationalists, and generally reassure traditional Quebec that all change is reversible and impermanent. The result was increased radicalization and militancy on the part of movement groups and their increased alienation from the mainstream. One of the byproducts of this development was a new perspective on communication and its strategic implications.

In a historic document, Le Deuxieme Front (1968), the president of the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CSN) spelled out (among other things) the movement's attitude towards the mass media. The media said Marcel Pepin, are basically capitalist enterprises, and function according to market principles, not the public interest. Journalists have little room to maneuver in this situation, while editorial policies are tied to the defense of the capitalist economic system and the traditional political parties. As a result, alternative social viewpoints can not be transmitted via these media, which simply exploit the citizens who consume their product.
Pépin's speech was remarkable for the frankness with which such a major public figure here denounced the traditional press so vigorously. He called for "ideological action" on the part of union and popular groups, to create tools for popular information. Union publications are a partial response, said Pépin, but the situation called for creating movement-controlled structures to handle the spreading of information among the population at large.

Meanwhile, on the political front, 1967 saw the creation of the Mouvement Souveraineté-Association, precursor to the Parti Québécois, by René Lévesque and his dissident Liberals. Parti Pris dissolved a year later, unable to deal with the decision whether or not to support the new group. The Front de Libération Populaire, a semi-clandestine group, became the focus of radical opposition, publishing a journal, Mobilisation, and organizing various street actions and mass demonstrations. In the working class district of St-Henri, the briefly published first "community newspaper," L'Opinion Ouvrière, was soon eclipsed on its left by a competitor, Le Pouvoir Ouvrier.

In this context, in which the interdependent nature of media, private capital and the State became more and more evident to groups proposing a wholesale remaking of Quebec society, a whole series of efforts to take control of communication emerged from the opposition social movements between the years 1969-72.

**ALTERNATIVE COMMUNICATION PRACTICES**

The hardening of social struggles towards the end of the 1960s, along with increasing determination to give these a political expression, gave birth to the awareness of a need for communication on the part of opposition movements. This need was expressed differently, however, by different groups at different moments.

**Autonomous Media**

In 1969, a coalition of labor federations, nationalist groups and community activists set up l'Association Coopérative des Publications Populaires, a cooperative whose main activity was to publish a weekly Sunday newspaper, Québec-Presses.

Québec-Presses was intended to be different in every sense: its content, structure and financial base were all organized to correspond to the paper's objectives of serving "national" and "popular" interests by supplying "free information" ("information libre"). Responsible to a general assembly of shareholders, the paper was actually run by an editorial committee made up of its own working journalists.

For the first time, social activists and their sympathizers had their "own" newspaper to provide reliable, up-to-the-minute information about ongoing struggles, background information, and news of organizing efforts. For example, in the first issues Québec-Presses reported on the growing opposition to Montreal mayor Jean Drapeau's regime, and the embryonic efforts then underway to create a municipal opposition party; police raids and repression of citizens' committees; the mounting campaign against the Company of Young Canadians; demonstrations against the provincial government's proposed language legislation; imprisonment of labor leaders accused of sedition; and so on.

Québec-Presses's objectives were spelled out in a declaration of principles published on March 15, 1970; the paper was seen, essentially, as "a popular response to cultural domination."

Between 1970-72, especially, the paper played an indispensable role in the evolution of Quebec's social movements. It was not only the journal of record for the political opposition, but also a mobilizing tool and, above all, a cultural unifier. Particularly in time of social crisis, as during the October crisis of 1970 and the general strike of May 1972, Québec-Presses played a major role. Itself explicitly part of the movement, Québec-Presses tried in practice to remain faithful to the values of the movement which had spawned it, and the groups and individuals comprising the movement expected nothing less. Québec-Presses suffered, along with other organizations, the repression which followed October 1970 and the growing pains of the Quebec Left in the years subsequent. When
Inter-union sectarianism struck the labor movement around 1973, Québec-Press was one of its most sorrowful victims. As the national question took on new complexities with the rise of the Parti Québécois and its softening of the independence line, as the community movement faced the challenge posed by the extreme Left, Québec-Press came onto shaky ground. Ultimately, a combination of factors, external pressures in the form of advertiser boycotts and distribution difficulties and internal political pressures, led to its demise in November 1978. At its dissolution, it was selling about 30,000 copies of each weekly issue. Indication of the newspaper's importance to the movement can be seen in the fact that nearly seven years later, in May 1981, a special commemorative issue of Québec-Press was brought out by activists conscious of the role it had played and of the gap left unfilled by its disappearance.

A second autonomous media operation of the period was l'Agence de Presse Libre du Québec (APLQ), the news agency which gained nation-wide fame in the late 1970's after it was revealed that the RCMP had mounted a clandestine illegal campaign against it in 1972.

The APLQ was created in the wake of the October crisis around a core group of former Université de Montréal students involved in the student paper (later magazine) Quartier Latin, and a number of disaffected professional journalists. The agency began operating in March, 1971, cheaply and simply producing a weekly information package aimed at a select clientele of activist groups. The project was able to cut through the stumbling blocks of financing and commercial attractiveness which often thwart "alternative" media ventures. But its choices were political and strategic as well as practical. In its form and its content, APLQ sought to address collectivities rather than individuals and to participate directly in the social drama as it "covered" it by helping to build a communication and information network.

APLQ was more radical in its scope and political orientation than Québec-Press. Where Québec-Press sought to provide information which activists would find useful, APLQ also sought to be an integral part of the activist movement. While Québec-Press addressed itself to anyone who wished to read it, APLQ virtually demanded that those who used it become active correspondents.

Through 1971-72 the agency played an important and successful role as liaison and transmission circuit for the disparate activist groups operating around Quebec. It was especially instrumental in bringing the province's far-flung regions closer together with its weekly Bulletin. It was able to survive and flourish with a core of 200 subscribing union and community groups. Subscribers could use the information package however they pleased.

APLQ was especially concerned with the need to expand and stabilize the movement's information capacity, with the place and importance of communication in political struggle, and with the importance of popular participation and deprofessionalization of communication skills. Its conception of the movement of which it was a part insisted on the importance of openness and self-management.

As of fall 1972, however, APLQ began to undergo a political transformation. It decided to change its format and to publish a larger-circulation magazine, rather than an information package for subscribers. More important, it redefined its purpose and its relationship to the movement. It no longer saw itself as a unifying force in a pluralist movement of the Left, but as a catalyst for the eventual creation of a vanguard "Party." Reassessing its conception of the role of information and communication, it began to advocate subordination of ideological work to political strategies. This transformation had consequences beyond the APLQ itself, reaching out into the movement and setting the tone of political debate in the mid-1970's.

Direct Action

Alongside the creation of autonomous media, communication goals and objectives were themselves "subjects" of the two major moments of social and political upheavals of the period, theOctober crisis of 1970 and the general strike of public sector workers in 1972.

It is appropriate for our purposes to pick up the hypothesis put forward by D. Latouche, and supported by A. Siegel, that the October crisis was primarily a struggle for temporary control of
mass communication systems in Quebec. As one commentator of the day put it, official information was caught in its own trap, as the FLQ successfully manipulated traditional media values and news framing rules to establish direct links of communication with the population. The broadcast on national television in Quebec of the FLQ's manifesto was the high point of the crisis, from the FLQ's point of view. It was, in fact, a victory for all those who had hitherto declared themselves partisans of counter-information in Quebec, of a need to invert the dominant ideology and re-label reality according to alternative criteria.

All documentary evidence available from the period indicates that the manifesto hit a responsive chord among the Quebec people, contrary to what the politicians anticipated. It was not so much support for the FLQ which was in fact generated, but support for the FLQ's interpretation of Quebec society. In terms of cultural consolidation, the broadcast of the FLQ manifesto was a historic event of lasting significance. In October 1980, some 3,000 people gathered at a public meeting in a Montreal arena to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the invoking of the War Measures Act. The highlight of the evening was the retransmission on a large screen of a videotape of the Radio-Canada announcer soberly reading the 1970 manifesto.

The 1972 events were a highly contrasting version of the same phenomenon: the direct takeover or repossessing of means of mass communication by social activists in a time of crisis. This time, however, the takeover was not by a clandestine group of the most centralized media (the state network). Rather, it was a series of local takeovers executed by the proverbial nameless men and women of the base.

The May events of 1972 followed on the heels of a long process of labor radicalization, typified by the publication the previous year of radical manifestos by each of the main union federations. The first major confrontation of the newly-radicalized labor movement and its recently identified enemy, the Quebec State, was called for in the spring of 1972. For the first time, public sector negotiations were scheduled for a common bargaining table, and the workers were to be represented by a "common front."

The common front adopted an aggressive, but traditional, communication strategy: press conferences, ad campaigns, leaflets, lobbying, special editions of union publications, and more press releases. But as negotiations deteriorated and a mobilized constituency waited impatiently for direction from its leadership, workers began to take things into their own hands.

In late April began a series of wildcat strikes first among schoolteachers, then other public service employees, and finally spreading to workers in the private sector as well. On the north shore and in other heavily industrialized, highly unionized regions, entire towns were taken over by workers. In each of these towns, a key aspect of the militant action was the spontaneous occupation of radio stations, and in some cases TV outlets, by squads of workers. For several days in May, regular programming was replaced by union, or otherwise "pro-worker," news and "political" or "revolutionary" music. Private media monopolies in some 20 towns fell into workers' hands during these days, along with stations in larger centres such as Montreal, Quebec City and Chicoutimi as well.

Some of the nuances of the general strike situation indicate the increasingly complex and sophisticated nature of the social action of the period, and attitudes towards communication in particular. May 12, the day of the province-wide general strike, a delegation of workers from La Presse made the rounds of all Montreal dailies to ensure (successfully) that none of them would publish. The common front decided, however, to let the "pro-worker" Quebec-Presse appear -- if they could "verify" its content. The column of Parti Quebecois executive memeber, economist Jacques Parizeau, was pulled because the PQ was refusing to endorse the strike. This gesture provoked the anger of the Quebec-Presse journalists, who were otherwise highly sympathetic to the strikers.

In general, the direct takeover of Information media during the general strike of 1972 contributed to working-class consciousness about media, and gave workers a taste for running their own media and dominating the production of public opinion. Again, as in 1970, the media were caught in the trap of their own rhetoric, required to "cover" the events and, in so doing, fueling them further.

In both of Quebec's major crises of the period, communication was a major aspect. In both cases,
the crises were short-lived and the communication innovations which were a part of them had no concrete durable effects.

Media Challenged From Within

As we saw earlier, labor conflicts in Quebec's media institutions have been colored with political overtones, at least since the start of the Quebec Revolution. This became increasingly evident through the 1960's and 1970's, and is exceedingly so today. In fact, militancy among media workers and the connections they make between working conditions, control of production and the quality of their product, is one of the constants of Quebec social life.

Quebec's journalists considered themselves active subjects in the reform movement of the early 1960's. As public attitudes towards the Liberal reforms turned critical, militancy among journalists increased. By the late 1960's most francophone print and electronic journalists in the province were unionized with the CSN, Quebec's independent, relatively radical, union federation. After 1968, as social agitation in Quebec heightened, so did journalists' concern not to be used as mere transmission agents for the social and political elites which controlled both private and public media institutions. In 1969, this concern crystallized in the creation of La Fédération Professionnelle des Journalistes du Québec (FPJQ), a professional organization whose first main intervention was a brief to the parliamentary committee of the Québec national assembly set up by the Bertrand administration to look into freedom of the press.13

Journalists were among the groups particularly hard hit by the repression of October 1970, both in terms of arrests and police harassment and in professional terms. Union leaders in the Radio-Canada newsmix, to cite one example, were fired after they criticized the network's succumbing to political pressure in the crisis of the region.

In 1971, during a bitter pressmen's strike at La Presse, the journalists' union published a "Dossier Noir" detailing management manipulation of the news since the previous conflict at the paper in 1968. La Presse closed its doors in October 1971, preferring to leave its presses idle rather than continue to be the site of a sort of newsroom guerilla warfare waged by the journalists. The common front of La Presse unions created at that time was the precursor to the May movement of the following year. A massive, tension-ridden demonstration in support of the La Presse workers was the first of the many demonstrations of the period to rally workers, students and intellectuals in a common cause. Throughout the conflict, the journalists' union published a self-managed daily, Le Quotidien Populaire ("The People's Daily").

The La Presse conflict of 1971 represented workers' solidarity, the demystification of information, and heightened consciousness among media practitioners. It was a hallmark of professional media workers' involvement in social action and in taking a militant stance with regard to their own affairs.

In 1972, journalists' unions and organizations of various other categories of communication workers formed la Fédération Nationale des Communications (FNC), affiliated with the CSN. In subsequent years both the FNC and the FPJQ published widely on social issues related to media and information, despite occasional rivalry between professionally-oriented and primarily syndicalist journalists.

Interestingly, journalists constitute one of the sectors to continue militant union activity following the relative social calm which accompanied the coming to power of the Parti Québécois in 1976. In 1977-78 an unprecedented wave of strikes in media institutions paralyzed La Presse yet again, as well as Quebec City's Le Soleil, the private radio chain Radio-Mutuel, the provincial state educational television network Radio-Québec, and the dailies Montréal Matin and The Montreal Star. The last two organizations would die in the wake of labor conflicts there. At La Presse and Le Soleil, in particular, professional clauses related to control of journalistic product were at the root of the conflicts. As this is being written, in April 1981, Radio-Canada's news programming in Quebec has been blacked out for six months, and a journalists' strike is in progress at Le Devoir. In the latter case, the main issue is the union's demand for a grievance procedure with regard to management news decisions. In a previous conflict in 1975, Le Devoir journalists won creation of a joint worker-management news policy committee.

Thus, the mainstream media institutions are not restricted to the sidelines of social action in Quebec,
but make up one of the important arenas where it takes place. The journalists working there often find themselves directly involved in the broad social issues of the day, as well as report on them.

Politics and Propaganda

As we have seen, labor, nationalist and community politics took a radical turn in the early 1970’s, in the wake of the repression of October 1970. Along with the autonomous media which first appeared around that time, the direct action which characterized moments of crisis, and the increasing contestation of media institutions from within came various types of new political initiatives. Each one engendered its own distinctive contribution to the communication problematic.

Two archetypes of the radical politics of the 1970’s were the "Marxist-Leninist" and the radical reformist initiatives. The first relied exclusively on its own militant media, which evolved out of the APLQ experience to culminate in a press devoid of all interest for non-partisans of the political line of the particular group concerned. A proliferation of ultra-left groups, each with its own press, saw the light of day in this period, replacing the non-aligned broadly-based efforts of previous years, typified by Québec-Presse and the early APLQ. The "Marxist-Leninist" press was characterized by the conscious subordination of ideological and cultural activity to political line, and the explicit goal of "party-building." This press is mentioned here principally as it occupied virtually all the autonomous communicational space on the Left for a time, roughly between 1973-76, and was responsible for the "liquidation" of several projects of a communicational nature. 15

In spite of this domination of the Quebec Left, however, the dogmatic Stalinist current was not alone or unchallenged during this period. On the contrary, various new movements began to emerge gingerly in the wake of the polarization of activist Quebec between supporters of the Parti Québécois version of social democracy and the proponents of a barely renewed neo-bolshevism. These new struggles were basically in the domains of social transformation of daily life: feminism, ecology, urban struggles, sexual struggles. In many ways reminiscent of the early 1960’s, these movements were characterized by a somewhat naive approach to communication, relying in most cases excessively, when not exclusively, on gaining access to mass media in order to speak to a broader public. As in the early days of the Quiet Revolution, consensus was to be built by seeking common ground between media and movement. It would not always work, as certain movements bitterly learned, especially when issues and stakes were clearly exposed, or when a choice was available between "radical" and "moderate" protagonists of social reform. 16

The lessons of the mid-1970’s were bitter ones in this regard for both types of political movement described here: the extreme Left found itself boxed in, if brilliantly able to speak with full force and autonomy to ever-diminishing numbers of zealots. The new social movements, on the other hand, found they had no means of communication at their disposal when they really needed them, that is, once their modish flair wore off or when the mainstream media labeled them threatening.

As the 1980’s dawned, a certain settling of the waters seemed to be underway. New approaches to communication as a strategic problem for social movements began to emerge and, once again, autonomous media appeared which seemed oriented towards functioning as cultural unifiers, if on a smaller scale than the experiences of earlier years. 17 Critical evaluation of the Quebec political experience of the 1960’s and 1970’s became legitimate object of concern in the universities and the activist community. The apparent institutionalization of the national liberation movement, the expansion of social services and other welfare measures, and the economic crisis all combined to provoke (in Quebec, as elsewhere) re-evaluation of the forms of political intervention which had served for better or for worse in the preceding two decades. In this process, the communication problematic is at least on the agenda as an explicit item demanding particular attention.

CONCLUSIONS

This study enabled us to clarify a certain number of theoretical notions as well as to draw specific conclusions from the Quebec experience.

The theoretical antecedents of contemporary critical communication studies enable us to state that social communication is an ideological practice, being based as it is on the particular system of ideas and values in which a given population will recognize itself at a given historical moment. As
ideology, communication motivates particular social and political action, and can thus be considered a potential catalytic agent.

The institutions of mass communication can be seen as arenas of ideological struggle which must be taken into account by any social group attempting to exercise influence on society at virtually any level. In the case of "alternative political movements," this calls for a specific communication praxis, coherent with the movement's ideological and social objectives, and allowing for its own resources and social position. Contemporary alternative political movements, in Quebec and elsewhere, have rarely faced the communication question squarely, relying instead on unconscious, de facto strategies. Conversely, where communication strategies have been explicit they have fallen into easily schematized traps.

The politics of alternative moments in the West in the 1960's and 1970's have often been influenced by the orthodox Marxist notion that ideology is determined by social conditions, reducing the communication question to a simple mechanical process: it would suffice to open the eyes of the working class and they will rise up and overthrow the bourgeoisie. The few case studies which have been done show that this is not so easily the case. In general, analysis of communication experiences helps to demystify this notion, insofar as it illustrates the role of the cultural dimension in social struggle and in history. The cultural approach appears then to be particularly useful as a guide to communication strategies.

The communication struggle is a struggle over control of the production of social interpretations. Alternative political movements have usually compartmentalized this problem. Some have focussed on a critique of mainstream media as producers of ideological justifications for the prevailing system of domination. Some have tried to create alternative media in the hope that these would replace the mainstream ones, at least among a certain constituency. Some have focussed on gaining access. Progressive individuals have tried "working within the system," usually on an isolated basis.

There have been few attempts, however, to approach the problem exhaustively, to look at the communication question from a perspective which takes into account the social function of mass media in late capitalist society, the need to propagate counter-information and alternative ideas, and the limits and possibilities of the various available partial strategies. A comprehensive approach would need to recognize the strategic importance of occupying all available space in the media discourse, as a starting point.

The Quebec experience is particularly interesting in light of this line of reasoning. A rich variety of partial attempts to deal with communication informs us of the relative merits of different types of intervention. We are thus able to enrich our theoretical perspective with the concrete results of historic action and to begin to develop a model for communication practice for alternative political movements. Ongoing action-research in Quebec at this very time is an encouraging sign of growing maturity with regard to the question.

Based on the Quebec experience, we can propose the following prototype: The typical alternative political movement emerges in a state of relative innocence with regard to communication problems, and with no particular concern for the question. Gradually, as its own experience enhances the movement's critical consciousness of society, and as it evolves towards more sophisticated forms of social intervention, a new awareness of the role of media may set in. Depending on the extent to which it situates itself in opposition to the dominant currents in society, the movement may try to innovate in its own communication practice. It may or may not consciously adopt an explicit communication strategy, but its communication practice will certainly undergo modification.

We can divide the movement groups active in Quebec during the period studied into two broad categories: those which integrated a communication element into a broader political strategy (union movement, extreme Left), and those which sought to intervene socially without a consciously articulated communication strategy (most community groups, most political initiatives with the exception of the PQ). We can distinguish at least three types of communication practice which grew out of the social movements of the 1960's and 1970's: alternative media initiatives (Parti Pris, Québec-Presse, APLQ); direct attempts at temporary takeover of communication resources (FLQ, general strike of the common front); and attempts to influence mass media institutions initiated from within (professional and union actions of communication practitioners).
At the polar extremes of this communication typology lie the experiences of political subordination of communication as propaganda and the attempt to integrate political practice into the mainstream media system, practiced by revolutionary and reformist political organizations respectively.

On the whole, the communication experiences studied here appear to have been instrumental in the creation of the new collective memory, the new solidarity, the new emerging ideology which began to take root in Quebec in the early 1960's and which continue to evolve. In other words, their effect has been cultural rather than political. We have noted, for example, the rather marginal influence of traditional media in the unfolding of political action in some cases; the disproportionate and unexpected influence of marginal media in others; the possibilities of enhancing communication consciousness and opening new spaces by pressing on the internal inconsistencies of the media institutions; and the collapse of established media practices in time of social and political crisis.

This leads to a reinforced appreciation of the cultural component of communication, particularly with regard to the notion of alternative communication practices. Basically, we would restrict this notion to communication practices which contribute in some way to the creation, consolidation or enhancement of an alternative culture; that is, of a culture which fosters at least some degree of genuine opposition to the system of domination characteristic of our society. This notion is at odds with the one which places communication on the level of political propaganda, and sees communication as a simple transmission process.

Essentially, it is the cultural nature of communication which must be made to count politically. Alternative communication practices, both within and outside mainstream media, can contribute greatly to this process, provided we recognize their multifaceted possibilities. Mass media institutions are, themselves, the settings for important struggles related to competing modes of cultural production, defining the permissible parameters of public discussion, and labor relations. Small, autonomous media are indispensable vehicles for critical worldviews and innovation, particularly with regard to new social relations. New technologies may offer the chance to explode the traditional sender-receiver model of mass communication and democratize the communication process.

Viewing political action as cultural communication is the challenge which faces contemporary social movements. The strategic response they bring to it in each case is one measure of their social imagination.


5. See for example, Brunelle, op. cit.


12. CSN: Ne comptons que sur Nos Propres Moyens; Quebec Federation of Labor; L'Etat, Rouage de Notre Exploitation; Quebec Teachers' Corporation; L'Ecole au Service de la Classe Dominante.


15. The term "liquidation" comes from a classic pamphlet of the period published by the group Mobilisation in 1976, Liquidons le Spontanéisme, l'Opportunisme et l'Economisme. It aptly describes the fate of such groups as the Conseil de Développement des Médias Communautaires, le Centre de Recherche et d'Information sur le Québec, le Centre d'Animation Culturelle Ouvrière, le Comité d'Information Politique, the cultural review Stratègles, and the bookstore, Librairie Progressiste. Each of these autonomous organizations self-destructed, their members joining one or another of the vanguard political formations. The APLQ went a similar route, in fact, leading the way.