

# UNCOMMUNICATIVE PARTNERS: SOCIAL MOVEMENT MEDIA ANALYSIS AND RADICAL EDUCATORS

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## Abstract

While the research literature on alternative media, participatory media, tactical media, social movement media, continues to expand and explore this significant realm of public communication, it tends at the present time to be very heavily analytical. This is vital work but, I will argue, insufficient to meet the social and economic demands of the day.

A quite frequent absence in this research literature is, equally, attention to the interface between educational activities and socially committed media. It is as though thinking about media and thinking about education had been placed in solitary confinement, albeit in neighbouring cells.

These issues demand urgent attention. The paper will focus principally on the potential in colleges and universities, but not only in those educational contexts, for constructive interactions from all ‘five corners’ of the media firmament. These are, in no special order, media analysis, media activism, media arts, media industry professions and media policy-makers. There are moments and places of overlap between one or more of these, but too often, there are not. Sadly, although people and groups in this pentangle are deeply concerned with media communication, they rarely talk with each other, despite some progress in this direction within the current media reform movement in the USA.

## **Introduction: some definitions**

My main task is to address what some in our digital media era have termed “the Long Tail” of media (cf. also National Alliance for Media Arts and Culture 2004), in other words media which have gone under various headings: alternative media, citizens’ media, community media, tactical media, independent media, counter-information media, participatory media, , Third Sector media, social movement media. Each of these terms carries its pluses and minuses.

Thus from one perspective “alternative” media is a completely vapid designation, since everything is alternative to something; yet from Chris Atton’s angle of vision, the term’s very vagueness encourages us to acknowledge how everyday cultural practice is suffused with an extraordinary variety of alternative media forms (Atton 2001).

“Citizens’ media” for Clemencia Rodríguez is a term that acknowledges the force field of cultural citizenship (Rodríguez 2001); yet in the era of mass refugee movements and undocumented labor migration, the word ‘citizen’ as applied to media has to be explicitly stripped of its legal connotation.

Ellie Rennie has developed a very effective case for using the term “community media” (Rennie 2006); yet in my view, this term is still always haunted by the ‘misty-rosy’ undertones of the word ‘community.’

'Tactical media' is the term favored by internet activist and writer Geert Lovink (2002: 268), even though his explanation of the term is almost an anti-definition: '[tactical media is] "a deliberately slippery term, a tool for creating 'temporary consensus zones' based on unexpected alliances... hackers, artists, critics, journalists and activists... Tactical media retain mobility and velocity."

In situations then where the 'post-modernity' concept has genuine analytical traction, 'tactical media' is no doubt a viable term, moving and grooving in sync with Hakim Bey's notion of Temporary Autonomous Zones (Bey 1991). I am sorry if I horrify anyone here with the prospect that post-modern Amsterdam with a Social-Democratic administration may not be the *Zeitgeist* in its entirety, but the further one moves from that arena Lovink's term does risk becoming threadbare.

'Independent media' is the term favored by Herman and Chomsky in order to denote non-corporate, non-state, non-religious news media. The term has a primarily rhetorical motivation, namely to dispute the frequent claim that news media in liberal capitalist polities, especially the USA, enjoy full freedom and independence. So far so good; yet the implicit news bias in Herman and Chomsky's use of the term forecloses on a whole array of grassroots media and cultural expression that have nothing directly to do with news or journalism.

'Counter-information media', originating with the late Pio Baldelli (1977), but still very much current (Vitelli & Rodríguez Esperón 2004) is also a term framed very much within the journalism arena, where 'information' is used as a synonym for 'news'. Undoubtedly, the mission to fill in the gaps and distortions in hegemonic news sources and empirical specifics is an important one, as mainstream war and ecological news coverage repeatedly demonstrates. Yet we need much more still than punch-for-punch counter-information, and than an information strategy whose agenda is dictated by the need to respond rather than radically reframe.

'Participatory media' is a term used intensively in global South development projects, and in its original design meant that people affected by these projects should have an active role in framing them and subsequently evaluating their progress (Mefalopulos 2003). This strategy also prioritized the ways in which media of all kinds should be involved to these ends, in other words the dead reverse of top-down communication strategies. Habits die harder than rhetoric, however, and in practice the term 'participatory' has mostly become an empty buzzword batted to and fro among development administrators in their RFP documents.

"Third Sector media," denoting media in the voluntary social action sphere, is a term sometimes used in European discussions. It is implied, though not actually used, in the European Parliament's report *Community Media In Europe* (European Parliament 2008). It is a policy-based term primarily defining these media as what they are not, in other words that part of the media spectrum which is not commercially, governmentally or institutionally funded. It is thus a convenient term for media policy debate, but offers no more than this.

'Social movement media' is the term I tend to prefer (Downing 2008), inasmuch as it anchors these media projects in social movements large and tiny, constructive and repressive, all of the above. On the other hand, it has to be admitted that there is a vast plethora of small-scale media, from parish magazines to mosque bulletins, from zines to fan websites, which only partially or not at all carry any intimate connection with any kind of social movement.

At this point, we might be inclined to agree with Bolivian video-maker, author, poet, film historian and media activist Alfonso Gumucio Dagron (2004) in his cry of despair at the iron determination among academics to produce absolute definitions of social realities – definitions to which those realities are then required to conform. And we need to acknowledge a further basic reality, that defining these media is bound to be far more difficult than defining mainstream media, whose forms and genres and organizational structures are really quite restricted in comparison. It should not surprise us then that the definitions that I have just skated through overlap at points, and are always lacking. It is a direct reflection of these anthropologically polymorphous media forms.

Until the beginning of the present decade, media projects of this ilk - most often small-scale, often ephemeral, almost always under-funded or entirely unfunded - were basically under the radar of conventional media research. They were too messy, too pathetic in comparison to mogul media, and altogether too 'nano' to be worth spending precious research energy on.

That scenario has changed quite noticeably, with the publication of more and more research studies in this area, many of them of book-length, and with the emergence of an annual international conference dedicated to such media, the OurMedia/NuestrosMedios conference, which to date has met in the USA, Spain, Colombia, Brazil, India, Australia and Ghana. With the advent mid-decade of the so-called 'social networking' sites such as YouTube, MySpace, Facebook and the rest, to sweep airily past this zone of research has ceased to be plausible.

The question now is whether that should be a matter for satisfaction? Should we break out the champagne to celebrate a new healthy bouncing child for the rapidly expanding media research family? Or alternatively, from the vantage-point of Britain's critics of media studies for whom our field is a fertile straw man, is it high time to put media research on the morning-after pill?

I think neither. I want to push debate in an entirely different direction. I am taking the inclusion of the word "humanity" in the conference title and "strategic action" in the panel title to indicate commitment to the social consequences of our research and teaching. Within *that* frame, I plan to continue my discussion of social movement media within an overview of the frequent current configuration of Media and Communication Studies programs. These, in my view, have a crucial fault-line. Or lines.

### **The Pentangle**

Those intensively involved in media issues outside the academy form, I would suggest, a pentangle. In alphabetical order they are media activists; media analysts; media artists; media industry professionals; and media policy-makers. There are indeed those who double up as media educators and analysts, or industry-based analysts, or government-based researchers, but let us stay with the pentangle for a moment.

What is striking about this pentangle is the frequent degree of suspicion and even worse, mutual depreciation, among these points on the media compass. Media industry professionals roll their eyes at media studies, and the academics return the compliment. Media activists roll their eyes at both, and if either pays any attention, the compliment is returned. Media artists often see media activists as pre-aesthetic, and in turn are defined by them as self-absorbed elitists, though both agree the media academics to be generally removed from anything that matters much. Some media policy-makers bemoan the lack of useful input they seem to receive from these other quarters, while other media policy-makers simply rely on corporate input and get on with it. Either way media policy-makers are like media analysts, frequently a target of scorn and mistrust, seemingly the only common communication currency within the pentangle.

These divisions and still more tend to reproduce themselves flawlessly in the academy, where Media Studies and Media Production are not only separate departments, but often split between the social sciences and the arts, or in the USA where cinema studies and rhetoric studies may be in Liberal Arts, while Journalism Studies fiercely protect themselves against pollution by Communication Studies. Even in departments where media makers of various kinds and media analysts co-habit, there is often mutual suspicion and fear that resources will be unevenly allocated to one wing or the other. Even if there is not competition for scarce resources, as in "we *desperately* need someone in animation/media economics/journalism/film history", and even when internal relations are friendly and respectful, the curriculum typically *juxtaposes* analytical and media-making courses but does not seek in any strong way to get them beyond flirtation and actually married. So students often graduate with a gorgeous mosaic in their heads of mutually insulated knowledges.

It's a syndrome with very deep roots. The division of labor between thinkers and doers is etched into our history and social fabric, and affects many more activities than media. As Richard Sennett writes in his recent book *The Craftsman* (Sennett 2008: 11):

“History has drawn fault lines dividing practice and theory, technique and expression, craftsman and artist, maker and user; modern society suffers from this historical inheritance.”

These divisions today are actively throttling the real potential of media education programs to enable an engaged rather than superficial dialogue among the five points on the media compass.

This issue is not unique to media programs. Glenn Adamson’s absorbing analysis of the relation between thinking about craft and thinking about art (Adamson 2008), while never engaging with media production and therefore rarely discussing *collective* media practice, demonstrates in passing throughout how entrenched is the instinct to establish *impassable* chasms between real creative workers and mere craft producers. We do not *have* to follow Howard Risatti in his exhaustive efforts to chart the essential differences among art, craft and design in his *A Theory of Craft* (Risatti 2007), or in his failure too to move beyond the individual artist or craft worker to the *collective* reality of media production, in order nonetheless to recognize in media production the intelligence of the hand, of the experienced brain in action. As Risatti puts it, speaking of the craft worker but by implication about most of us, media makers, media analysts, media educators: “...material... needs to be ‘lovingly’ coaxed into functional form” (Risatti, op. cit.: 107).

We media educators, especially, are able in many instances to provide a forum for these differing interests and activities to engage with each other, even though participants in such fora may quite often depart shaking their heads and wondering what they were doing there. The potential for mutually illuminating dialogue in such quasi-neutral spaces is nonetheless there, and it is a failure of mission, in my view, for Media programs not to use their facilities to encourage a serious mutual engagement, not least in their own and their students’ interests. Of course this knowledge exchange will be riven by social interests, some of them no doubt mutually incompatible. But that’s not news and is no reason for not working at making it work. It is a large but crucial agenda, and inasmuch as it flies in the face of history and our proclivity for mutual jealousy, it is a radical education agenda, one that the growing Media Reform movement in the USA increasingly evinces.

Indeed, elements in this argument, though I had not realized so when initially writing this analysis, were first put forward by Canadian media researcher Marc Raboy nearly twenty years ago.\* He proposed then that in the interests of expanding the reach of substantive, strong democracy, those involved in media issues should aim to link forces in five areas: critical media analysis, media literacy education, creation of autonomous media, support for constructive initiatives within mainstream media, and involvement in media policy-making (Raboy 1991: 169-171).

### **Social Movement Media and Radical Media Educators**

I want in the last segment of this presentation to zero in on just one facet of radical media education, namely the potential interface between the social movement media activism which I reviewed at the outset, and media educators. Us here, in many cases.

*First point:* a frequent vice of Media Studies educators – and *I* can’t cast the first stone either! – is to disentangle and strip down media *praxis* in ways students may find initially revelatory and even deliciously shocking, but which often risks educating them in the higher cynicism, disarming them as citizens rather than kitting them out. Where this happens, media analysis risks leading to severe political disability.

*Second point:* while many media studies programs likely cannot afford anything approaching a classroom equipped for film or video production, audio production, or student news production, none of us here needs telling that with our laptop we can research, produce, edit, create graphics and audio, and transmit *our* media content to anyone who understands our language and is connected. That cuts out great numbers of people with old computers and intermittent electricity supply, but still

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\* My thanks to Marc Raboy for drawing my attention to his essay.

leaves a growing multitude around the planet. As iPhone technologies develop, more and more of us will be able to use them as well as laptops. A recent study, *The Horizon Report 2008* (New Media Consortium 2008) – a global network of about 300 educational organizations – flags grassroots video and collaboration webs as technologies currently banging down our doors as educators, and mobile broadband and data mash-ups as only two or so years away from doing the same. Three or four years away at most, they argue, there will be increasingly available collaborative learning technologies, which will prod us to re-cast our still very vertical models of instruction.<sup>†</sup>

In turn this already means that media programs in affluent countries and in major cities in many countries, with no professional or even sub-professional production facilities, and also media studies programs with no connection to media arts programs, are now able to start to offer production courses. Programs in creative advertising are a perfect illustration of what has been possible for years now, but there are many more examples currently available. From the most elementary educational perspective, this dimension of their media analysis coursework will enable students in those programs to think and speak far more sentiently and fluently about the construction of media products than would otherwise be the case. Ideally some would take scriptwriting and production management courses, which would not require expensive equipment either, but would take them into the inner cogs of the media process.

However, my point is more than this. It is that for media educators and analysts who wish to pursue issues to their roots, radicals in other words, this junction of analysis and practice offers a critically important opening to the proliferation of social movement media abilities, experiments and experiences. Now if you are really content with the media systems we have, you should probably slope off and get a coffee or a beer at this point. If you are bored to the coccyx with talk about environmental issues, issues of ‘race’ and ethnicity, gender, class, global poverty, war, you are now officially excused from even trying to keep your eyes open.

For me, our priorities as media educators need to be shaped by recent contributions such as historian Peter Linebaugh’s study of the global influence of Britain’s 13<sup>th</sup> century Magna Carta and the Forest Charter. These established certain basic rights against the power of kings and the rights of common land ownership. Linebaugh points out how, invoking these charters, repeated equivalent assertions of common rights have surfaced over nearly eight centuries now, and have provided “the right of resistance to the reality of a planet of slums, gated communities, and terror without end” (Linebaugh 2008: 279). Our priorities also need to be shaped by veteran political scientist Sheldon Wolin’s *Democracy Incorporated* (Wolin 2008), in which he dissects with the aid of modern political history and political philosophy what he terms the dangerous contemporary U.S. trend towards an “inverted totalitarianism.” He describes this as the U.S. regime’s “genius in wielding total power without appearing to, without establishing concentration camps, or enforcing ideological uniformity, or forcibly suppressing dissident elements so long as they remain ineffectual” (Wolin 2008: 57), an argument echoing a book by Bertram Gross on U.S. politics some thirty years back, entitled *Friendly Fascism* (Gross 1980). He restricts himself to the USA, but the Blair, Berlusconi, Sarkozy, Putin, Hu phenomena are hardly unrelated, and collectively serve as cover for despotic regimes from Belarus to Burma. And our priorities need to be shaped by David Harvey’s discussion of dialectical utopianism in his *Spaces of Hope* (Harvey 2000).

Yet they may also be constructively shaped by considering the many specific historical cases of the actual junction between education, art, craft and analysis. I will instance just two. One is described in April Masten’s new study of the numerous women professional artists of the Unity of Art movement in the period 1850-1880 (Masten 2008), who after their education at New York’s Cooper Union became painters, designers, illustrators, engravers, colorists and art teachers, working in newspapers, a wide range of magazines, book-publishing, design and other spheres. The entire philosophy of the movement, to some degree influenced by Britain’s John Ruskin, was to overcome the gap between art for everyday media use and art for exhibition, between analysis and practice.

My second example is the collage movement in Central Europe in the period 1918-1945. In Matthew Witkovsky’s *Foto* (Witkovsky 2007), the exhibition volume of a collection of collage photography of that

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<sup>†</sup> My thanks to my colleague Dr Angela Aguayo for drawing my attention to this report.

period which showed at the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC, and at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art in Edinburgh, Scotland, chapters 3 and 7 in particular throw up a fascinating assemblage of projects that brought together artists, media analysis and education, and social movement media. These ranged from Berlin dada and the Bauhaus, which are well known, to groups much less known until this exhibition such as the Blok group in various Polish cities, the Devětsil group in Prague, Brno and České Budějovice, and the Zenit group in Belgrade the School of Applied Arts (ŠUR) in Bratislava. Photojournalism was one major expression of this international movement, and John Heartfield's work for the *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung* is far and away its best known example, but a huge range of other activities were evident in Central Europe in those 25 years.

To sum up then in two sentences:

- in the face of the widespread political immobilism that has greeted Bush-Cheney, their clones and their admirers, *our* media education programs can and must communicate through *making* media, not only by dissecting them.
- and where the "learning-by-doing" dimension of our program is stamped by the hegemony of commercial media production's priorities and fads, our task must be to encourage our students to develop "constructive schizophrenia," the ability to play the commercial game if need be for survival while constantly retaining critical mental distance from it and the *longing* to change it.<sup>‡</sup>

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<sup>‡</sup> As Canadian chanteuse Joni Mitchell put it in her famous 1970s album *Court and Spark*, in response to her analyst's verdict she was schizophrenic, "Two heads are better than one!"

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