

Contesting Media Power

*Alternative Media
in a Networked World*

EDITED BY NICK COULDRY AND JAMES CURRAN

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Part I

INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

CHAPTER 1

The Paradox of Media Power

Nick Couldry and James Curran

To say that “the media are powerful” is a cliché, yet to ask in what media power consists is to open a riddle. Or so it seems. In the chapters that follow, we intensify this paradox by extending it to a global scale but also, through the rich comparative detail that is generated, aim to show that the paradox is more illusory than real.

One way of defining media power, if an unwieldy one, is as a label for the net result of organizing a society’s resources so that the media sector has significant independent bargaining power over and against other key sectors (big business, political elites, cultural elites, and so on). This seems straightforward until one realizes that the media’s bargaining power (for example, over the framing of a particular story) is of a curious sort: Media are unable to bargain over the basic rule of their existence, which is that they depend on “content” generated *by others*. (Or at least they did: One interpretation of the recent spread of celebrity stories and “reality” coverage in the press and television in the United States and Europe is that rising economic costs of news production have forced media to generate their own “contents” and treat them as if they were “external” reality.)

Here we come to the heart of the apparent paradox about media power, which derives from the fact that such power faces two ways. From one direction (the more common direction of analysis) “media power” is a term we use to point to how *other* powerful forces use the intermediate mechanism of media (press reports, television coverage, websites, and so on) to wage *their* battles (big business against labor, old professional and class elites against new cultural elites, and so on). From this direction, media power disappears; it is merely the door through which the contestants for power pass en route to battle. We find this approach, for example, in Manuel Castells’s recent theory of the global “network society,” in which he argues that in a space of accelerated information, people, and finance flows, the media portal is increasingly important for all social action, but the media themselves have no power as such (1997: 312–17). That this direction of analysis often has precedence is only to be expected; in studying the media’s social role, our priority (whether as researchers or as social actors) may well be to analyze competing forces outside the media, whose conflict is waged in part through media coverage.

There is, however, another, equally valid direction of analysis from which media power does not disappear. This view holds that, contrary to the illusion that media only “mediate” what goes on in the rest of society, the media’s representational power is one of society’s main forces in its own right. From this perspective, media power (direct control over the means of media production) is an increasingly central dimension of power in contemporary societies (Melucci, 1996; Curran, 2002). It follows that, as with most forms of power, media power is not generally made explicit by those who benefit from it: the media. No wonder it is rarely the direct subject of public debate.

This second direction of analysis rejects the fallacy in traditional “fourth estate” conceptions of media and the liberal models based upon them. Far from media simply being there to guard us against the overweening influence of other forms of power (especially government), media power is itself part of what power watchers need to watch (see, for example, Curran and Seaton, 2003; Keane, 1991). On this view, even if we cannot imagine a society where media power is the *first* mover of social action (since without other forces, such as economic and political power, there would be nothing for media to represent), media power remains a very significant dimension of contemporary reality. In short, media power is *an emergent form of social power* in complex societies whose basic infrastructure depends increasingly on the fast circulation of information and images.

That, however, is not the end of the paradox. If we turn to the book’s main subject—how power is contested under different but structurally comparable conditions across the world—it becomes obvious that media power is rarely the *explicit* subject of social conflict. This is not because media power isn’t a “hard” type of power, like economic power, but rather because even “soft” forms of power (those relating to struggles over identity and respect, for example) involve conflicts whose main actors rarely fight for media power as such. Thus, for example, feminist struggles in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s sought to challenge patriarchy, thereby overriding any specific concerns about capturing media resources as a tool in that conflict.

This, however, is not the only possibility. As the reader will discover many times in this book, a conflict that appears initially to be about other forms of power turns out, in part, to be about relative control over society’s representational resources (see, for example, the chapters by Gross, Lim, and Rodriguez). In some conflicts, parties may come to see their own relative lack of influence over how they are represented as being at stake in their struggle—or, at least, as Todd Gidin (1980) described in his classic account of the 1960s U.S. student rebellions, as seeming crucial after the event. Contests over access to the means of media production are important, for example, in current antiglobalization battles.

The example of the global Independent Media Center movement and its role in antiglobalization struggles runs like a thread throughout this book (see especially the chapters by Bennett, Couldry, and Downing). Why does this example stand out? Perhaps because media power itself is an increasingly important *emergent theme of social conflict* in late modernity, as the mechanisms for representing social conflict themselves multiply. This is not the first time in history that media power has been explicitly contested; it was crucial to the French Revolution, to the slow social and cultural revolutions against Soviet rule in Eastern Europe in the 1970s and 1980s (Downing, 2001), and to the Iranian revolution of the 1970s (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi,

1994). What was missing from those major conflicts was access by all sides to global means of self-representation, which could change the scale on which those conflicts were played out. The Internet, particularly through its linkages into traditional media, now gives any local actor the potential to reach global audiences (Hardt and Negri, 2000). As the scale-effects of media transform specific conflicts, it is possible that social actors may start to compete explicitly for influence over those scale-effects (that is, over media power). At the very least, a comparative look at how media power can be, explicitly or implicitly, contested in different places under different conditions is needed, as media studies attempt to globalize its discourse (Curran and Park, 2000).

Two Images

The shift between conceptions of media power that this book reproduces is captured through two contrasting images.

On the one hand, the media may be imagined as a waterfall whose intensity, size, and impact on the ground below (whose “power,” in a word) depend almost entirely on the weight and direction of water collected on the land behind the waterfall; no one would say that the waterfall itself has “power,” properly speaking, even though the particular configuration of rocks at the waterfall’s edge would have a minor influence on the way water falls below. But that influence is infinitesimal compared with the mass and direction of water behind the waterfall. So too the term “media power” in traditional analysis is only a figure of speech for the media’s role as a conduit for *other* forms of power, much larger than the media.

We, on the other hand, think of media power as more like a processing plant, built near the waterfall, and receiving all the diverted water and converting it into something quite different—first, energy and by-products of that energy, and, second, information on the amount of water farther upstream. Suppose that this water was the main energy source in our imaginary society; information about its pressure and volume would be vital for society as a whole. In this situation we *might* treat the processing plant as a “black box” and concentrate only on the flows across the plain, but this would be a great mistake. What about the efficiency of the processes that convert the water pressure into energy and the choices as to where that energy is sent, who controls it, and to what purpose? What if public readings of water flow are systematically inaccurate because the measuring instruments are incorrectly calibrated?

Here we see that the relationship between wider social forces (the flowing water) and media output (the energy and informational outputs of the processing plant) is not natural; it has nothing in common with a waterfall. So we must open up the “black box”—that is, enter the plant and study how decisions are made, who influences them and who doesn’t, and analyze the consequences of those decisions (and exclusions) in the longer term. Once these questions are opened up, others follow; these are explored in the remaining chapters of part I (Bennett and Couldry).

This second image of media power invites us to think concretely about the *range of power sources* whose influence might be called upon to challenge the existing

decision-making elite that runs our imaginary processing plant. Those wanting to challenge the processing plant's mechanism (which stands in, according to this image, for media power) might turn to *the state*. Part II of the book accordingly examines a range of perspectives on how the state directly or indirectly subsidizes challenges to existing configurations of media power. Another force, especially in countries dominated by market models of media provision (the majority of countries in the world), would be *the market*. Part III looks at how media markets of a certain complexity can generate, over time, alternatives to existing concentrations of media power. Yet another source of potential challenge would be the whole range of forces we call *civil society*, including various forms of religious organization and authority. Part IV looks at how particular elements of civil society have either become contestants for media power themselves or subsidized others to challenge media power.

Inevitably this scheme simplifies how different social forces compete explicitly or implicitly over the power represented by existing media institutions. Overlaps are crucial, of course, but we hope that the divisions around which the book is organized will highlight certain key comparisons.

Having considered the comparison between power sources on which challenges to media power might rely, we now need a different comparison relating to media technology. For our processing plant, we can imagine at least two different ways in which technological change might influence challenges to its media power: first, by enabling new types of processing plants, to be built as rivals, that divert water earlier or even extract energy in different ways and, second, by connecting the energy or information supply generated by the original processing plant to other processing plants across the world, thus perhaps linking the populations served by all those plants into a large-scale struggle. New media represent both types of change, affecting the local bases of media power and the scale on which it can effectively be contested. Part V considers various examples along these lines.

Before looking more closely at the detailed comparisons that emerge across the course of the book, we need to clarify one additional term: "alternative media."

Alternative Media: The Forgotten Land

The process we call "media" is the historic result of countless local battles over who has the power to represent the reality of others. Once such battles are won, they generally cease being remembered as battles. Who, for example, outside a small circle of media scholars, gives thought to the early days of dispersed radio production in the U.K. or France? The forward drive of media development not only foreshortens the past but obscures the present; yet in the shadow of even well-established concentrations of media power, contests continue to be fought for access to media resources or distributional opportunities. As social conflicts rise and subside, media power is frequently at least an incidental aspect of struggle; such was the case in the 1990s, when the broad front of popular protests against the long-standing conservative regime in Britain generated new press and video productions outside the mainstream (McKay, 1996). Yet media produced outside mainstream power concentrations have rarely received the at-

attention of scholars; media studies has, for the most part, been content to treat the facts of media power as if they were necessities—indeed, natural features on the face of the media landscape.¹

If media power itself is an increasingly significant theme of social conflict, then media studies should adjust its focus to include not only mainstream productions (major television and radio channels, film majors, the main Web portals, and so on) but also the wider terrain of media production, some of which seeks, explicitly or implicitly, to challenge central concentrations of media resources. This is what we mean by "alternative media" in this book: media production that challenges, at least implicitly, actual concentrations of media power, whatever form those concentrations may take in different locations.

This is not the only definition in use among researchers of nonmainstream media. The one that comes closest to our own is presented in Chris Atton's book *Alternative Media* (2002). John Downing (2001), the leading writer in this neglected field since the 1970s, prefers the term "radical media," as it highlights the role of nonmainstream media in contesting established power blocs with a view to wider social emancipation. A disadvantage of this second definition, however, is that it excludes from its understanding of "alternative media" any media on the right of the political spectrum, even those whose challenge to the concentration of media resources in central institutions is explicit and direct. Clemencia Rodriguez's (2001) concept of "citizens' media" develops Downing's notion of "radical media" in an interesting direction, by making explicit a link with forms of citizenship practice and empowerment, influenced in particular by Latin American theories of empowerment or "concientization" through education and more open communication (see also Rodriguez's chapter in this volume). Citizens' media, in Rodriguez's sense, is in effect a more politicized formulation of our own concept of alternative media; the two definitions are not incompatible. Nonetheless, for our purposes in this book, "alternative media" remains the more flexible *comparative* term, since it involves no judgments about the empowering effects of the media practices analyzed. What we bring together here may or may not be media practice that is politically radical or socially empowering; but in every case, whether indirectly or directly, media power is part of what is at stake.

"Media power" and "alternative media," then, are useful broad terms; they describe a vast range of media production activity, little of it familiar from media studies textbooks yet almost all closely embedded in everyday struggle by communities and individuals. In the final section of this introduction, then, let us explore what wider themes emerge from this complexity, whether as conclusions or as pointers to further research.

Media Power: A Landscape of Contestation

THEORIES AND CONTEXTS

The tide of part I signals the more theoretical focus of the present chapter as well as chapters 2 and 3. In our use of "theoretical" here, however, we do not refer to the grand theory that "masters" all the empirical details of the later chapters; no such framework is possible yet, or perhaps ever. We mean only to signal that these opening chapters

offer more generalized arguments that open up common questions across a range of local contests.

W. Lance Bennett's chapter on Internet-based global activism starts out from the paradox that corporate media power and concentration seem stronger than ever and the resources of global communication networks available to promote neoliberal discourse are larger than ever. How, then, can it also be true that new media (from mobile phones to digital radio to the Internet and the World Wide Web) are increasingly used by networks that aim to challenge the very same neoliberal discourse—often in spectacular fashion, as at the Seattle meetings of the World Trade Organization? To understand this, we must, Bennett argues, move beyond technological determinism in our accounts of new media and look to the “social, psychological, political, and media contexts” that give new media forms their elective affinity with new forms of protest. Without minimizing the Web's purely technical changes that allow protest groups to replicate across national borders with unprecedented speed, sometimes occupying the very same branded communication space that they are attacking (as with the campaigns against Coca-Cola and Starbucks that Bennett discusses), there must be more involved than technology. The answer, Bennett argues, lies in the cultural dimensions of globalization itself, particularly the globalization of markets and labor: the increasing fluidity and mobility of political identities, within and across national borders; a greater awareness of and engagement with the global scale of problems raised by corporate neoliberalism; and the increasing permeability of media distribution channels themselves to alternative, viral flows that spread countermessages at a speed deriving from the global reach of the very discourses they attack. This cultural and media “subpolitics” of globalization, as Ulrich Beck (2001) calls it, offers a particularly good fit with Internet-enhanced communication space.

In the subsequent chapter, Nick Couldry also seeks to uncover some contextual factors underlying possible new challenges to the concentration of media power. But Couldry is less interested in the successes of certain recent global mediated protests than in practices that contest media power as such. He scans the contemporary scene for signs of a new orientation to media and communication that challenges the traditional idea that these should be concentrated in a narrow sector of society. Here, like Bennett, Couldry foregrounds not technological change in isolation but broader cultural changes in people's thinking about media, specifically challenging the assumption that media production is an activity fundamentally separate from media consumption. Couldry develops two examples: the media philosophy of Matthew Arnison, who was crucial in developing the software on which the global Indymedia news website network relies, and the contrasting market-based philosophy of Paul Eedle, the co-founder of the Web news service “Out There News.” Deciding which innovations will have long-range significance, he argues, is not the main issue at this stage; more important is identifying the factors likely to be crucial in any alternative media practice taking root over the long term.

THE FRAGILITY OF STATE SUBSIDY

The three chapters in part II pursue this question in relation to an obvious, but also problematic, source of encouragement for challenges to media power: the state. Each

chapter concentrates on a country whose media history has been dominated by state-subsidized media: the U.K., Australia, and Sweden.

Chris Atton offers a sobering assessment of the long-term impact of the U.K. “infoshop” movement, which grew out of earlier state provision for the unemployed but sought to develop a base for political and social activism. Drawing on a rich range of social and political theory (from Alberto Melucci on “new social movements” to public-sphere analysis), Atton analyzes the trajectory of the Autonomous Centre of Edinburgh (ACE) in Scotland, which grew out of the Edinburgh Unemployed Workers' Centre. This originally state-sponsored centre was closed down in the 1990s, and its offshoot had to acquire premises in a poorer district, losing its previous links to local networks. While the new ACE's marginality removed it from direct state surveillance, its lack of resources—other than the “self-exploited” labor of a small group of activists and the proceeds of a small trade in punk music—constrained it from growing. Over the longer term the Centre has been unable to develop into a base for social resistance, neither expanding its membership nor developing a vision that could be communicated to a wider community. Atton's chapter indicates the long-term price that derives not so much from state subsidy itself as from the state's wider influences over socialization and cultural definition.

Christine Morris and Michael Meadows's chapter suggests a much more positive account of state subsidies to media operations among indigenous communities in Australia. But it is a story that offers little encouragement either to traditional top-down models of state media provision or to well-meaning but vacuous market-based notions of the “knowledge economy.” Starting out by acknowledging the importance of communication (in Raymond Williams's sense) as “a central organizing element of Indigenous society,” Morris and Meadows critique earlier ideas of how the state might encourage Indigenous media. Whereas earlier centralized schemes involved little consultation about local needs, the more successful recent developments these authors discuss (often very remote from conurbations) involve networks with a strong community impetus. Such networks respect traditional participatory forms of community management, with “intellectual property” based not on individual possession but on “responsibility and reciprocity.” Underlying these is a new non-market-based concept of “knowledge management” that respects all community members' status as “knowledge workers” and their right to participate in decisions about how a communications infrastructure can be built. This is a positive answer to Bennett's question about the cultural contexts in which information and media technologies connect with social change.

Lennart Weibull's chapter examines one of the most potentially promising sites for state subsidy of the dispersal of media power. In Sweden since the late 1960s, the state has acted to redress what it saw as inherent market pressures toward press concentration. With a weak national press and Social Democratic newspapers particularly prone to market pressures, the Social Democratic government, after much public debate, began subsidizing newspaper delivery and production costs. In the longer term, however, that subsidy system appears not to have worked, failing to prevent the erosion of smaller newspapers because it was not pitched at a high enough level to outweigh market pressures exerted by other newspapers, advertising markets, and the increasing importance of other media as news and entertainment sources. The result, Weibull concludes, has

been the limited long-term impact of an apparently laudable state attempt to mitigate the antidemocratic impacts of a newspaper free market.

Indeed, the implication of all the chapters in part II is that subsidies have only a limited effect in redressing the concentration of media power unless they are linked to community structures and practice.

THE AMBIGUOUS MARKET

If the Swedish state seems, on the face of it, a promising source of effective subsidy for a more even distribution of media power, the Californian marketplace would seem the opposite. However, as Rodney Benson shows, in the first chapter of part III, California's weekly press challenges assumptions that market pressures always work against alternative and politically contentious voices. The circumstances of the four San Francisco and Los Angeles weekly papers that Benson examines in his meticulous study vary of course, with only one (the *San Francisco Bay Examiner*) being financially independent from corporate influence. The radicalness of their contents also varies. While some give consistent attention to social activism and radicalism, others are positioned slightly to the right of the political spectrum, although they still give more prominence to socially focused news than does the commercial national press. What emerges, however, is evidence that under certain circumstances large media marketplaces may generate alternative voices quite effectively: The key factors here, Benson argues, are the social and cultural dynamics of the local journalistic field, the diffusion of radical politics among the wider readership, and the strength and diversity of the advertising market and its target audience. While affluent California offers a particularly favorable case, this account provides an important corrective to overly simple readings of the market's relation to media radicalism.

Andrea Press and Tamar Liebes take this argument into potentially even more hostile territory in discussing the fate of feminist discourse in Hollywood films of the 1990s. Yet the outcome is ambiguous. Even when we consider the particular constraints of the film industry, which, after all, must generate products that persuade people to leave the security of their homes, the visible influence of feminist ideas at the end of the century is disappointingly limited. Excluding film genres that are predefined as exclusively male (pure action or martial arts films), only a few notable advances have occurred. These, argue Press and Liebes, are significant but concentrated in areas such as police and legal dramas; an example is *The Silence of the Lambs*, in which, exceptionally, a desexualized role is available to the heroine. By contrast, in areas such as the stereotypically female genre of "romance," storylines represent a significant regression from the feminist films of the 1970s. At the same time, no exclusively "female" genre has emerged as a counterweight to the all-male genres.

While the first two chapters of part III consider difficult cases for alternative media subsidy and reach contrasting conclusions, Terhi Rantanen and Elena Vartanova's study of current developments in Russian media highlights an important national case where the dividing lines between state and market influences are less clear. Rantanen and Vartanova show that, in the semi-chaotic aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet

Union, a different organizational order is important—especially in terms of generating pressures in favor of, or away from, a weakened federal center. The consequence has been a very particular mix of global, national, and local influences, worked out across different media. The Russian press faced the dramatic collapse of state infrastructure, including the state printing industry, resulting in a sharp fall of circulation for national publications and the emergence of many local newspapers; this is a centrifugal force that the new Putin regime has only partly reversed. In broadcasting, by contrast, while regional television outlets are increasing, the continued structural link between state ownership and private funding remains crucial, with even market pressures (competing for advertising sources) reinforcing centripetal trends. It is too early to say whether the Internet will offer any alternative to these developments, since its emergence in Russia remains extremely uneven and metropolitan-focused. Russia thus emerges as the limit case for crude typologies of how support for alternative media emerges, since in locations where state and market infrastructure is itself underdeveloped or crumbling, a more complex picture must be studied in its local specificity.

THE CENTRALITY OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Part IV analyzes another source of alternative media subsidy: civil society. We understand civil society to include the whole range of social forces, whether secular or religious, in which alternative forms of authority and cultural influence can develop beyond the pull of state or corporate power.

Chin-Chuan Lee's chapter traces the successive stages whereby media liberalization emerged in Taiwan since the 1970s without resulting in a full political liberalization or a broad-based public sphere. The political magazines of this decade had close links with local civil society, unlike the Chiang Kai-Shek Kuomintang (KMT) regime they opposed, which represented a defeated mainland elite; ultimately, however, market forces dominated in this sector over political engagement. The history of television's expansion was also entangled in the last stages of resistance to the KMT regime, including the lightning spread of unauthorized cable television operations, albeit accompanied by the increasing penetration in Taiwan of Rupert Murdoch's Hong Kong-based Star TV. From 1992 on, however, underground radio offered a new focus of opposition coinciding with further splits in Taiwan's political parties. Though an exciting development that seemingly promised to challenge the inequalities of media power, the actual result, Lee argues, was to inflame ethnic antagonism. Looking back on Taiwan's intense relationship between media innovation and political conflict, Lee concludes that market and political pressures have led not to a genuine broadening of representation but to an increasingly fractured media space offering few prospects of further democratic change.

Clemencia Rodriguez's chapter presents a sharply contrasting account of media proliferation in a particular region, the Chiloé archipelago off the southwest coast of Chile. Despite Chile's exceptionally bloody national politics, this poor isolated region has seen a remarkable growth of community-based media; operating outside state and market forces, they rely instead on the cultural and social subsidy of the radical liberationist wing of the Catholic church. In Latin America, the Catholic church's authority as a social reformer

derives from a combination of religious teaching and the secular educational philosophy of Paulo Freire's work on *concientization* (empowerment through community-based communication). And the Chiloé area in particular, where modern media came late, has benefited from the presence of an inspirational leader, Bishop Juan Luis Ysern. The result of Ysern's strategy has been not only a significant network of community radio stations but also a much more broad-based community-managed practice of media production and local self-education. By focusing on this specific issue, Rodriguez highlights an important general point: the necessity to ground the analysis of alternative media in the study of how media are used in actual community practice, so as to put into context the abstract audience ratings that dominate most accounts of which media matter.

Keyan Tomaselli and Ruth Teer-Tomaselli's account of the controversial history of the Catholic newspaper *New Nation* in apartheid and postapartheid South Africa offers a very different perspective on the Catholic church's global media politics. For while *New Nation* itself was influenced by liberation theology aimed at social change, it faced virulent opposition from Tradition, Family, and Property (TFP), a conservative overseas arm of the Brazilian Catholic church. TFP, in a temporary but initially powerful alliance with the threatened apartheid regime in the late 1980s, tried to eradicate *New Nation* in the context of the regime's wider battle to discredit the radical South African churches. *New Nation* itself drew on state subsidies, but from outside South Africa (that is, from the European Union and elsewhere); it also sought support from Freirean philosophies of communication. The long-term consequences of the end of apartheid for alternative media in South Africa remain uncertain, as external subsidies for *New Nation* were withdrawn, leading to its closure in 1997, and no new forms of subsidy for alternative media within South Africa have emerged.

The People's Republic of China, in turn, offers a different version of how battles for social and media power may be waged both within and across national borders. As Yuezhi Zhao's vivid study brings out, the spiritual movement Falun Gong, which in the 1990s became the leading voice against Chinese state authority, is no radical voice. On the contrary, after the movement had emerged from an intra-elite struggle over the direction of modernization, its increasing opposition to state power in the late 1990s was geared to social ends that are profoundly conservative. Falun Gong's media presence initially developed through a mixture of state and market subsidy, with a strong range of underground media outlets as well. But as Falun Gong was outlawed in China, it turned to the very different media resources of the Chinese diaspora in exile, waging a battle across U.S. media (cable television, books, press, websites) and increasingly, like left-wing movements, using the organizational potential of the Web to develop a media activism that has included hacking into Chinese state television. As Zhao's chapter makes clear, globally resourced media activism, while of major local political importance, need have no radical political potential.

NEW MEDIA: A SPACE OF HOPE?

Part V steps back from the sectoral question—From where in society is subsidy to alternative media likely to come?—to concentrate on the cultural and organizational

possibilities of new media forms themselves. Of course, as many have pointed out, new media are not themselves radical, and it is particularly important here in this new terrain to look closely at a range of local developments.

In his chapter on the history of the Web-based current affairs site "openDemocracy," James Curran examines the specific potential of the Internet to open up new spaces of democratic engagement. Whereas economic and other factors have previously held back alternative media, the Internet lowers entry costs and lessens the importance of certain kinds of restricted managerial expertise. The question remains, however, whether the Internet's influence is emancipatory or not, to which Curran's answer is a qualified yes. In the aftermath of September 11, openDemocracy—initially a modest, relatively insular British pilot project—was transformed into a flourishing, international magazine, specifically because the Internet allowed for the speedy building of a global audience. However, the nature of this audience is problematic: If it is true that a global civil society is emerging on the Web, it is one that is segmented by interest and structured by inequality.

John Downing's chapter looks in detail at the dynamics of the Independent Media Center (IMC) movement, which many have regarded as one of the most significant alternative media developments at the end of the twentieth century. Without in any way discounting the technological importance of robust interactive software for the IMC movement's success in spreading beyond North America, Downing argues that this success needs to be understood in terms of its roots in the socialist anarchist tradition prevalent throughout the twentieth century, on the one hand, and its continued utopian promise, on the other. He traces the survival of such notions as community and self-organization, against very great odds, as well as the notion of "prefigurative" politics, which offers a further perspective on the community-based communication philosophies discussed in the chapters by Morris and Meadows and by Rodriguez. What gives the IMC story its special significance is its protagonists' increasing awareness of the importance and potential of developing globally based resistance and media participation outside the mainstream. The result, Downing argues, is a vision (with of course both potential and achieved reality) of media activism that is strategically astute as well as politically effective.

Larry Gross's analysis of the explosion of spaces for gay self-expression and communication on the Internet also insists on the positive potential of the vast new communication spaces that the Internet has opened up. The change is not confined, as Gross shows, to single countries in the West with privileged Internet access, but represents a truly international development covering gay virtual communities in much of the developing world (including India and China). Lacking social spaces around them where they can be open about their sexuality, countless gay men have found support in websites opened up by market pressures and the Internet's resistance to explicit censorship. Gross, however, refuses to see in these important developments an automatically positive outcome, since it is quite possible that the strands of social and indeed media activism in gay self-representation will recede as commercial and corporate pressures on the Internet play out. We return here to the ambiguity of media power as a submerged theme within social activism waged—sometimes necessarily, as here—through media forms.

The last two chapters shift our focus to mediated struggles in mainstream politics. Merlyna Lim explores a situation in which new media focused opposition at a time of political turmoil: the overthrow of Indonesia's President Suharto in 1998. Here, the influence of state media censorship was paramount. Lim's analysis centers on the basis of new media's influence in civil society (rather than on political parties, as in the subsequent chapter). What is striking about the campaign to topple Suharto, Lim argues, was its roots in new civil spaces that emerged very quickly around the *warnet*, the Internet-enabled version of the traditional Indonesian *warung* or street-side eating-house. Independently owned, small, and closely linked to neighborhood communication networks, *warnets* helped spread Web-based news and scandal among the whole urban population, including millions who themselves had no direct access to new media. Lim's analysis once again confirms the importance of looking, as Bennett advises, at the cultural and social underpinnings of particular challenges to media power. For in the region under discussion, this challenge operated only at the margins of media power's operations. It could not prevent subsequent corporate investment in the *warnet* sector, and Indonesia's new corporate-owned chains of Internet cafes are less closely linked to civil society.

Finally, Sharon Ling examines the intra-elite conflict within the Malaysian government over the succession to Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad that led to the sacking of his deputy Anwar Ibrahim in 1999. This major political event was picked up in the heretofore weak alternative press, which, as in Taiwan, is closely linked to opposition parties that lack proper representation in the state-sponsored media. As Ling points out, whereas the Malaysian alternative press failed to articulate any genuine alternative political vision, partly because of the state censorship under which the press operates, Internet sites offered more resistance, often drawing on foreign news sources. The prospects for an alternative Internet sector in Malaysia remain highly uncertain, however, as state action targets the Internet as well.

Conclusion

This book presents, we suggest, a picture, inevitably tentative, of a contested global media landscape of immense breadth and complexity, far wider than usually allowed onto media studies' small screen. From *warnet* cafes in Indonesia to local educational media in Chile and Australia and community information centers in Scotland, to critical strands of fiction or news practice in the South African press, U.S. West Coast weeklies and Hollywood, to the ambiguous space of post-Soviet Russia's expanding media, we see a landscape of many battles through and over media power involving many social forces: global corporations, local entrepreneurs, local churches, even networks at street level.

Firm conclusions would be premature, although the inadequacy of analyzing state, market, or religious subsidies in isolation from broader changes (and potential subsidies) within civil society is already clear. We need, no doubt, further detailed work on the specific factors that enable or constrain challenges to media power in specific local conditions within the increasingly global frame of Internet-enhanced communication space. At the very least, we hope, this book will encourage others to continue that work.²

Notes

1. Media history is the one subarea of media studies where this is not true. The "Alternative Media" special issue of *Media History* (vol. 7, no. 2, 2001) provides a useful entry point to the fairly extensive historical literature on this topic.

2. We wish to record here our thanks to Richard Smith for his vital editorial assistance in the final stages of editing this book. Many thanks also to Brenda Hadenfeldt and Andrew Calabrese for their enthusiastic support of this book project, and to Alden Perkins for calmly guiding us through the production process.

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CHAPTER 2

New Media Power

THE INTERNET AND GLOBAL ACTIVISM

W. Lance Bennett

Prospects for contesting media power may appear to be smaller today than ever. Observers note a combination of global media trends that have diminished the quantity, quality, and diversity of political content in the mass media. These trends include growing media monopolies, government deregulation, the rise of commercialized news and information systems, and corporate norms shunning social responsibility beyond profits for shareholders (Bagdikian, 2000; McChesney, 1999; Herman and Chomsky, 1988). In the United States, the quest to deliver consumers to advertisers with low-cost content has dramatically shrunk the space for even mainstream news about politics, government, and policy (Bennett, 2003a; Patterson, 1993, 2000). The political space that remains is increasingly filled by news formulas based on scandal, mayhem, and personality profiles (Bennett, 2003a). These conditions are clearly less severe in systems with dominant public-service commitments, but even the venerable British news system has undergone substantial upheaval as commercial pressures have reduced news programming on private channels (Semetko, 2000) and the formidable BBC has entered a period of reinvention.

The unanswered question is: *Have these changes in media systems limited the capacities of groups contesting established power arrangements to communicate both among themselves and to larger publics?* Since political content space has been sacrificed to more commercially viable programming, it might be easy to conclude that political activists and minorities are even farther removed from the mass media picture. If this is the case, the political viability of new movements might be in doubt. As German political scientist Joachim Raschke put it, in starkly describing the importance of mass media for movements: "A movement that does not make it into the media is non-existent" (quoted in Rucht, forthcoming). Despite the hyperbole in this claim, there are notable cases in which media logic has undermined the viability and even changed the organizational coherence of movements (Gidin, 1980).

D. Rucht (forthcoming) argues that stark generalizations about media and movements are difficult to support, as different protest eras have been characterized by different media patterns. William Gamson (2001) observes that media coverage of collective action movements even varies considerably from issue to issue. And, finally, media

access varies with the public communication strategies and organization models adopted by cause movements, as indicated in a comparative analysis of abortion discourse in Germany and the United States (Feree, Gamson, Gerhards, and Rucht, 2002).

Adding to the theoretical challenge of generalizing about patterns of media power is the core question of just what we mean by "media" these days. With the fragmentation of mass media channels and audiences, and the proliferation of new digital communication formats, it is difficult to draw sharp boundaries around discrete media spheres. As various media become interactively connected, information flows more easily across technological, social, and geographical boundaries. Hence the subject of this chapter: the rise of global protest networks aimed at bringing social justice to the neoliberal world economic regime. These activist networks have used new digital media to coordinate activities, plan protests, and publicize often high-quality information about their causes. Considerable evidence suggests that global activists have figured out not only how to communicate with each other under the mass media radar but also how to get their messages into mass media channels (Bennett, forthcoming).

Many activists are sharply critical of mass media coverage, charging that the press and officials have criminalized their protest behaviors. However, it is also clear that global activists have been neither isolated nor destroyed by mass media filtering. The dense information networks of the Web offer ample evidence of internal communication. Large numbers of mass actions around the world have received extensive, if generally negative, media coverage. At the least, such coverage signals the presence of a movement that is demanding a say in world economic policies and their social and environmental implications. Moreover, numerous campaigns against corporate business practices, trade, and development policies have received favorable coverage in leading media outlets (Bennett 2003b, forthcoming). There is little evidence that global media have marginalized global protest. George Monbiot proclaimed in *The Guardian* that "the people's movements being deployed against corporate power are perhaps the biggest, most widespread popular risings ever seen" (quoted in Redden, 2001, n.p.).

In this chapter I explore the rise of global activist networks that have challenged mass media power. My analysis does not ignore the fact that many conventional media power relations still apply to the representation of the radicals and their causes. As noted above, news coverage of demonstrations, in both Europe and the United States, is often filled with images of violence and hooliganism. Most of that coverage makes little effort to describe the diversity of issues and demands in the movement—opting, instead, to lump them all together under the largely journalistic construction "antiglobahzation." Nor have activists networked and communicated so effectively that they have somehow put global capitalism on the run. As Saskia Sassen (1998) points out, the preeminent uses of global communications networks remain the efforts of corporations and governments to strengthen the neoliberal economic regime that dominates life on the planet today.

All of this said, impressive numbers of activists have followed the trail of world power into relatively uncharted international arenas and found creative ways to communicate their concerns and to contest the power of corporations and transnational economic arrangements. In the process, many specific messages about corporate abuses, sweatshop labor, genetically modified organisms, rainforest destruction, and the rise of

small resistance movements, from East Timor to southern Mexico, have made it into the mass media on their own terms (Bennett, forthcoming). Moreover, in developing direct power relations with global corporations, activists have exploited the vulnerability of carefully developed brand images by tagging them with politically unpleasant associations. The threat of holding brands hostage in the media spotlight has become an important power tactic in the fight for greater corporate responsibility (Bennett, 2003b).

This analysis is concerned with identifying *what conditions enable activists to use so-called new media—mobile phones, the Internet, streaming technologies, wireless networks, and the high-quality publishing and information-sharing capacities of the World Wide Web—to communicate the messages of their protest networks across both geographical and media boundaries.* The phrasing of this question is important to reiterate. I have talked elsewhere about *how* activists are using new media to promote their causes (Bennett, 2003b, forthcoming). But what is missing from my account thus far, and from many others as well, is an understanding of the social, psychological, political, and media contexts that make new media particularly conducive to enhancing the power of this global activist movement. To put the issue starkly: The Internet is just another communication medium. Admittedly, the Net has a number of distinctive design features and capabilities, but these differences do not inherently or necessarily change who we are or what we do together. However, personal digital media offer capacities for change if people are motivated by various conditions in their environments to exploit those capacities. In short, the question of whether we go shopping or make revolution on the Internet—and of how the shopping trip or the revolution compares with its less virtual counterparts—is more the result of the human contexts in which the communication occurs than the result of the communication media themselves (Agre, 2002). Accordingly, the remainder of this chapter addresses the interactions between new media and the social conditions that have enabled their uses for often impressive political ends.

Assessing the Political Significance of the Internet

Much of the attention to the Internet and politics has been directed where the least significant change is likely to occur: in the realm of conventional politics. *Established organizations and institutions such as unions, political parties, governments, and election campaigns are likely to adapt new communication technologies to their existing missions and agendas.* Thus, it becomes hard to see transformative effects beyond reducing the speed or cost of existing communication routines. However, in areas where new patterns of human association are emerging in response to new issues—and new forms of political action are developing as well—new communication options have the potential to transform both political organization and political power relations. (For a review of various political applications and effects of the Internet, see Graber, Bimber, Bennett, Davis, and Norris, forthcoming.)

As noted above, the recent period has been marked by impressive levels of global activism, including mass demonstrations, sustained publicity campaigns against corporations and world development agencies, and the rise of innovative public accountability

systems for corporate and governmental conduct. All of these activities seem to be associated in various ways with the Internet. In some cases, the simple exchanges of information involved could also be accomplished by mail, phone, or fax. In these cases, the Internet simply enhances the speed and lowers the costs of basic communication—at least for those who have crossed the digital divide. In other cases, however, the Internet and other technologies, such as cellular phones and digital video, enable people to organize politics in ways that overcome limits of time, space, identity, and ideology, resulting in the expansion and coordination of activities that would not likely occur by other means. Even for those still on the other side, the digital divide can be crossed—in some cases, with the assistance of groups dedicated to transferring technology. For example, Greenpeace has made efforts to empower continuing victims of the Bhopal disaster.

Communication in distributed networks becomes potentially transformative when networks spill outside the control of established organizations. Networks that are not limited to the agendas of any of their members may, under the right conditions, become sustainable, growing democratic organizations. They may exhibit high-volume, simultaneous, interactive communication, complete with Web-based organizing and planning as well as hyperlinked public access to large volumes of politically diverse information.

When networks are not decisively controlled by particular organizational centers, they embody the Internet's potential as a relatively open public sphere in which the ideas and plans of protest can be exchanged with relative ease, speed, and global scope—all without having to depend on mass media channels for information or (at least, to some extent) for recognition. Moreover, the coordination of activities over networks with many nodes and numerous connecting points, or hubs, enables network organization to be maintained even if particular nodes and hubs die, change their mission, or move out of the network. Indeed, the potential of networked communication to facilitate leaderless and virtually anonymous social communication heightens the challenge involved in censoring or subverting broadly distributed communication even when it is closely monitored. These points are elaborated by Redden:

The fact that it is a decentralised, distributed network currendy makes it hard for any elite to control online activities. It allows fast one-to-one, one-to-many and even many-to-many communication in web and conferencing forums. Together, the technological and economic aspects of the Net allow for cheap self-publication without mediation by corporate publishing. . . . Of course, cheap is a relative term. The Net is cheap, not in absolute terms, but relative to the efficiency of message distribution. It is clearly not a panacea that guarantees freedom of speech for all. But while it is not accessible to everyone who has something to say, it *does* dramatically increase the numbers of people who can afford the time and money to distribute information translocally to large numbers of other people. In short, it allows individuals and community groups to reduce the influence gap between themselves and wealthier organizations. (2001, n.p.)

The capacity to transform time, space, costs, and the very roles of information producers and consumers also enables the rapid adaptation and transformation of po-

litical organizations, and the creation of new sorts of power relationships (Bennett, forthcoming). For example, a short but creative partnership between Adbusters (www.adbusters.org) and Greenpeace (www.greenpeace.org) created a counterimage campaign for Coca-Cola. One of the *subvertisements* featured Coke's polar bear icons—a mother and her cubs—huddled together on a melting arctic ice flow as Coke's fantasy consumer world suddenly merged with the harsh environmental effects of the gases (HFCs) employed by Coke in its cooling and bottling processes. As part of this power struggle, a rogue version of the company's actual website was created, and Coke's carefully crafted consumer icons were replaced with politically disturbing images, including the cowering bears. The threat of hijacking and subverting the company's branded environment during its biggest commercial event, the Olympics, led the company to make a quick business calculation and commit to changing the chemicals used in its manufacturing process. One can get a sense of the communication politics of this campaign by visiting the rogue site at www.cokespodight.org. For a look at the Climate Change bears, click on *action* and then on *print a poster*.

What Kinds of Organizations Are Global Activist Networks?

The theoretical vocabularies used to describe hierarchical Weberian organizations or brokered political coalitions (e.g., McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, 2001) capture only part of the shifting social formations of vast, linked networks of individuals and organizations operating loosely but persistently to expand the public accountability of corporations, trade and development regimes, and governments. Yet it is not altogether clear how to characterize these networks. Even network theorists recognize that network structures are as varied as their social memberships and purposes (Wellman et al., 1996).

Some observers wax dramatic about the potential of vast Internet movements to organize and react rapidly to threats against human rights or planetary survival anywhere on the globe. For example, Richard Hunter has coined the term "Network army," which he describes as "a collection of communities and individuals who are united on the basis of ideology, not geography. They are held together by public communications, the Internet being a prime example. . . . Network armies don't have a formal leadership structure. They have influencers, not bosses who give orders" (quoted in Holstein, 2002, n.p.). The military metaphor is also employed by J. Arquilla and D. Ronfeldt (2001), who use the term "netwar" to describe the swarming behaviors of terrorists, criminal networks, and high-tech political militants. Another allusion to the distributed organizational impact of networked communication comes from technology popularizer Howard Rheingold, who has coined the term "smart mobs" to refer to people acting in concert on the basis of digital personal communication. He cites diverse examples of smart mob behavior that include the overthrow of Philippine President Estrada in 2001 with a series of demonstrations coordinated through cellphone messaging, the instant strategy and publicity by activists at the

World Trade Organization demonstrations in Seattle in 1999, and the planning of the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington (Rheingold, 2002; Schwartz, 2002).

Terms such as “network armies,” “netwats,” and “smart mobs” dramatize the transforming potential of new communication technologies, yet they seem inadequate to describe the emergence of loosely organized (segmented and independent, yet connected), geographically dispersed, and locally engaged collections of activists. The mob and army metaphors break down in part because they do not capture the daily activities of activists; at best, they (inadequately) refer to episodic collective outbursts. Beyond the occasional mass demonstration, activist networks are more likely to be found working on public information campaigns, negotiating standards agreements with the managers of companies, sharing information with other members of their networks, and finding ways to build local communities around social justice issues both at home and elsewhere.

Moreover, unlike armies, most global activist networks do not display a hierarchical command organization. And unlike mobs, they have considerably more refined communication and deliberative capacities. Perhaps the best account of the type of movement organization that enables vast networks to pursue diverse social justice goals on a global level is the SPIN model proposed by L. P. Gerlach and V. H. Hines (1968) and updated by Gerlach (2001). SPIN refers to movement organization types that are segmented, polycentric, integrated networks. *Segmentation* involves the fluid boundaries that distinguish formal organizations, informal groups, and single activists that may join and separate over different actions, yet remain available to future coordination. *Polycentric* refers to the presence of multiple hubs or centers of coordination in a network of segmented organizations. In their earlier formulation, Gerlach and Hines (1968) referred more explicitly to leadership, and used the term “polycephalous,” referring to many heads. In recent years, Gerlach (2001) has noted an avoidance of formal leadership, as well as a preference for personal ties among activists that enable each to speak for the organization and to hold multiple organizational affiliations—hence, the shift to the term “polycentric.” The *integration* principle has also evolved to reflect the horizontal structure of distributed activism. Ideologies figured more prominently in earlier movement accounts, in terms of both integrating and dividing groups (creating new segments). The requirement for ideological coherence seems far weaker in global activist circles today. The integrative function is provided by personal ties, recognition of common threats, pragmatism about achieving goals, and the ease of finding associations and information through the Internet. Inclusiveness has become a strong meta-ideological theme.

The resulting *networks* characterized by *dis* segmented, polycentric, and integrated organizational form are not centrally or hierarchically limited in their growth or in their capacities to recombine around different threats or internal disruptions. Since the social network linkages are nonhierarchical, information exchange is relatively open. And the redundancy of links in segmented polycentric networks enables them to continue to function even when important organizations leave or change their roles. This is how Gerlach described the emergence of SPIN organization in global activism:

Since at least the 1990s, an increasingly broad array of environmental rights, social justice, farm, and labor activists, as well as anticapitalist anarchists,

have worked in various ways to define multinational corporations and international banking, trade, and economic-development organizations as threats to human welfare and environmental health, because of their pursuit of global economic integration and growth. These activists promulgate their ideas about these global threats through personal contact, print media, and, especially, the Internet. Thus informed, the activists use major worldwide meetings of officials of the international community as forums to gather in protest and publicly communicate the threats they perceive. Their often militant demonstrations force responses from police and local governments, which then provide new opposition against which they can converge. One noted example took place in Seattle, Washington from late November to early December at a meeting of the World Trade Organization. (Gerlach, 2001: 300–301)

Limits on Definitions of Global Activism as a Movement

In a useful attempt to distinguish global activism from many other types of transnational political action, Sydney Tarrow (2002) offers an inventory of other patterns of activism on the world scene that are often mistakenly linked to globalization. In the process, he issues a warning about too-casual uses of globalization as an explanatory factor:

Many forms of transnational activism—such as human rights, humanitarian aid, and justice against genocide and torturers—have little or nothing to do with globalization and much more to do with dictatorship, democracy, and the abridgement of human rights. By placing such movements under the global umbrella we risk obscuring their distinct origins and dynamics. I prefer to limit the term “globalization” to major increases in the interdependence of economic relations—a trend that has occurred several times in history (Tilly, 2002) and is by no means unilinear. What is perhaps distinct about it in our era is that it is accompanied by a partially-independent process, the creation of a web of international institutions and organizations. By reducing the causal chain of transnational politics to a by-product of globalization, analysts both risk ignoring a great deal of transnational activism that has nothing to do with globalization and ignoring the significant independent role of both state and international institutions in bringing people together across national boundaries. (Tarrow, 2002: 16–17)

These points are well taken. However, beyond their confines lies a protest movement that is uniquely engaged with the “partially independent process” at the root of national and international power shifts associated with economic globalization. Not only is this movement engaged with new sites of global economic power, but the activists associate in ways that reflect new globalization-related aspects of identity and resistance. Because of these patterns of association (some identified by Gerlach,

above), these global activists have developed models for empowering uses of digital communication media that have not been employed by many of the groups that Tarrow rightly rules out of the globalization protest movement. Why some activists are pursuing more empowering applications of new communication technology, and others are not, is a question that involves their being rooted in very different (e.g., globalization versus state centered) social and political contexts. These contextual factors are developed theoretically in the next section.

Internet Empowerment: Some Theoretical Generalizations

An obvious generalization is that networks of diverse groups could not be sustained without the presence of digital communication channels (e-mail, lists, organization and campaign websites, mobile phones) that facilitate information exchange, coordinate action, and establish electronic records of common cause. A related generalization is that the scale of protest on a global level seems impossible without the global communication and coordination capabilities of the Internet. A third generalization building on the first two is that the Internet enables both the diversity and the global scale of protest at greatly reduced costs of brokerage that are ordinarily attributed to the expansion of movement coalitions (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, 2001).

Even more important for explaining the flexibility, diversity, and scale of this activism is the way in which the preferences for leaderless and inclusive networks is suited to the distributed and multidirectional capabilities of Internet communication. Communication within many of the organizations in these networks also reflects a similar decentralized, distributed model. An interesting example is the Indymedia (www.indymedia.org) activist information system analyzed by Downing in this volume. This system has grown from a single collective that produced live information during the "Battle in Seattle" in 1999, to nearly 100 affiliates around the world. While there is some hierarchical editing and writing of stories, Indymedia is remarkably true to its open-publishing commitment, which enables virtually anyone to become a reporter. This commitment to democratize the media is promoted in efforts to create open-source, automated systems for posting, archiving, editing, and syndicating networked information.

Another case involves the French organization ATTAC (www.attac.org), the Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions for the Aid of Citizens. Founded in Paris in 1998, ATTAC has produced various national counterparts in Sweden, Germany, and elsewhere—counterparts whose agendas and political tactics all seem different. Even ATTAC's network in France has grown in ways that resist direction from central leadership in Paris, while the peripheral committees have elevated a variety of their own issues to the common agenda. Although a leadership group in Paris still takes actions in the name of the organization, the agenda of the organization reflects the churn of local initiatives and virtual deliberations. One result is that ATTAC has

moved away from its initial chartering mission of securing a "Tobin" tax on world financial transactions to be returned to aid impoverished localities (Le Grignou and Patou, forthcoming).

Understanding Global Activism as a Product of Globalization

What the above examples suggest is that the rise of global activism—as reflected primarily in the coordination of issue campaigns and far-flung demonstrations—should not be attributed solely to the reduced communication costs of the Internet. A stronger theoretical proposition involves specifying what the activists bring to their digital interactions. I propose that the underlying social and political dynamics of protest have changed significantly due to the ways in which economic globalization has refigured politics, social institutions, and identity formation within societies. In particular, we should not take for granted the multi-issue linkages, the choice of transnational targets, the facelessness, the inclusiveness, or the global scale of this activism. These features of the global social justice movement may reflect the underlying social and psychological contexts in which both the activists and their Internet applications are embedded. In other words, digital personal media enable the fine linkages that connect people across time, space, and issues; but what opens growing numbers of activists to see so few temporal, spatial, political, or issue barriers in the first place? *What features of contemporary society motivate activists to form networks that are at once fluid, collective, and individualistic?*

Showing how domestic restructuring shapes the political outlooks and the communication styles of activists is a key element of our story, but there is more. Global communication infrastructures have also changed in important ways, enabling (1) the production of high-quality content by ordinary people, (2) the creation of large-scale interactive networks engaged by that content, (3) the transmission of that content across borders and continents, and (4) the convergence of media systems so that personal (micro media) content has more pathways through which to enter mass media channels. In these ways, the global change movement is empowered by the dual capacity of the Internet for internal and external communication. For example, the Internet attracts growing numbers of ordinary media consumers who may encounter activist information on the Net itself and in the growing interfaces between the Net and the mass media. This audience-building capacity of the Internet seems to differ from earlier activist internal communication (niche newspapers, mimeographed pamphlets, underground radio) by reaching audiences that frequently extend far beyond activist circles. One question that emerges here is: *What properties of digital media systems enable information to flow through the information layers of the Web until it reaches both consumers and producers of the mass media?*

Based on these considerations, the power of the Internet in global protest (and in many other political settings as well) can be traced to at least three important elements

of its human context—the first two of which derive from the economic effects of globalization, and the third from the globalization of communication infrastructures:

1. the willingness of activists to share, merge, and tolerate diverse political identities;
2. the perception on the part of many activists that vast and complex problems have escaped the regulatory grasp of governments and nations, and that these problems require the scaling of protest activities across great reaches of time and space; and
3. the growing permeability of all media—mass and niche, old technology and new—to cross-cutting communication that enables viral messages to travel the newly configured bounds of cyber-time and -space (see point 2) and to reach large publics with identities that are open to the diverse experiences that global change has visited on many inhabitants of the planet (see point 1).

Why are these elements the most important contextual factors shaping the power of personal digital media in global activism? They happen to be, in my view, the three most important noneconomic correlates of globalization itself: the freeing of identity from the conforming dictates of modern organizations; the refiguring of time, distance, and place; and the construction of ever more sophisticated and interlinked communication networks that both drive and harmonize the first two factors. (For development of these ideas, see Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1999, 2001; and Castells, 1996, 1997.)

Putting Internet Politics in Context

Thus far, I have contended that the Internet is not inherently transformative of either human communication or social and political relations. Rather, it is the interaction between the Internet and its users—and their interactions, in turn, in material social contexts—that constitute the matrix within which we can locate the power of the new media to create new spaces for discourse and coordinated action. Our exploration of new media power thus entails a theoretical exploration of the three primary social, spatial, and communicational contexts in which the Internet is used.

GLOBALIZATION OF RESISTANCE: THE IDENTITY SHIFT

There is a burgeoning literature on how global economic change has affected the basic institutions of society (family, church, school, job, community) in ways that produce profound effects on individual identity. Anthony Giddens (1991) was among the first to recognize that these changes were both negative (producing stress, insecurity, complex life management issues, and personal responsibility-taking for structural problems) and positive (expanding personal freedoms to choose and change identities). What seems most important is that as identity bonds weaken from groups, people have less reason to create and maintain their identities through conventional (partisan, national, and ideological) forms of social conflict and exclusion.

The important (and not to be underestimated) exceptions, of course, are threatened traditional and conservative groups (Christian and Islamic fundamentalists, ethnic nationalists, etc.) in fragmenting modern societies. While reactionary groups struggle to hold the line on change, often by trying to impose threatened moral values on the rest of society, those who are more adaptive to the transformation of society often engage in remarkable explorations of self and identity: forming new types of families and new spiritual movements, exchanging world art and music, exploring new jobs and careers, attributing less importance to nation and government, and forming cosmopolitan ties with others in distant parts of the world.

As Tarrow (2002) notes, cosmopolitanism is not a new phenomenon. (The Silk Road and the Hansa League come to mind as examples from the past.) However, there does appear to be something of what he and his colleagues term a *scale shift* in recent times, implying both an increase in numbers of those with identifications and activities in transnational localities, and the emergence of a class of ordinary citizens who increasingly see the sites of their political action as ranging from local to global without necessarily passing through national institutions on the way. Tarrow characterizes global social justice activists as constituting a movement in contrast to other cosmopolitans who have long worked in international arenas to deliver disaster relief aid, to assess the conditions of immigrant populations, or to target specific states for human rights abuses: “I will, however, use the term *global justice movement* to apply to that coalition of environmental, human rights, developmental and protectionist groups and individuals who came together around the turn of the century against the injustices of the international financial system and its leading member, the United States” (Tarrow, 2002: 21).

R. Inglehart (1997) identifies those most likely to shift their identifications and interests away from conventional national politics as younger, more educated generations who have come into adult life during the advanced stages of globalization. I have discussed the ways in which these identity changes have resulted in a shift toward a *lifestyle politics* in which ideology, party loyalties, and elections are replaced with issue networks that offer more personal and often activist solutions for problems (Bennett, 1998). As identities become more fluid, and less rooted in geographical place (e.g., nation) and political time (e.g., the election calendar), individuals are both freer and under greater pressure to invent themselves and their politics.

It is important to recognize the structural roots of these broad identity changes. Ulrich Beck (2001) makes a distinction between the late-modern condition that he terms *individualization* and the older ideological concept of *individualism*. Individualization reflects the breakdown of one set of social welfare structures and their replacement by more direct market experiences with work, health care, and other basic social needs. This restructuring of the individual experience makes the state less protective or useful, while at the same time freeing individuals to explore cosmopolitan, transnational political arrangements that may better address the problems in their current condition (Beck, 2001).

Old (modernist) labor and ideological activism continue in the present transitional phase of global change, yet the institutional foundations of such collective consciousness are eroding. This means that the social and identity principles underlying

resistance itself need to be refigured as new generations of activists emerge. For example, Antonio Gramsci's classic assessment of the social foundations of political identity seem to poorly describe the ranks of the Direct Action Network, the Ruckus Society, Indymedia, and the many neo-anarchists joining protest networks today:

In acquiring one's conception of the world, one always belongs to a particular grouping which is that of all the social elements which share the same mode of thinking and acting. We are all conformists of some conformism or other. . . . The starting point of critical-elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is "knowing thyself" as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory. (Gramsci, 1971: 324)

J. H. Mitdeman (2000) and many others (for example, Beck, 1999, 2001; Giddens, 1991) argue that globalization has transformed this process of group-based identity formation and resistance by altering the conditions of group life not just in the servant states of the global economy but in the dominant postindustrial democracies as well. As individuals experience social fragmentation, the ironic result is that the unexamined traces of group memberships become replaced with far more examined identity processes. People are more likely to discover the self as an active project involving reinvention, therapy, self-improvement, personal and planetary renewal, and spiritual quests. As collective identities expressed in ideologies become less useful in mediating and linking movement networks, individual activists are more able to identify with the experiences of "other" classes, causes, cultures, and places (Mitdeman, 2000: 169).

The ease of identifying with distant and diverse partners in problem definition, solution, and cosmopolitan community is the engine that drives the process of individualization into new collective forms. The Internet happens to be a medium well suited for easily linking (and staying connected) to others in search of new collective actions that do not challenge individual identities. Hence global activist networks often become collectivities capable of directed action while respecting diverse identities. This diversity may create various problems for maintaining thematic coherence in networks (see Bennett, forthcoming) and for ensuring the capacity of outsiders—particularly those still embedded within modernist political contexts—to grasp the core concerns of the activists. Despite such vulnerabilities of networks, the power of the Internet is thus inextricably bound to the transformation of identity itself (Castells, 1997). This echoes the earlier claim that communication technologies cannot be understood without reference to the identities and symbolic interfaces of the people using them.

Despite the chaotic potential of SPIN-type networks, the diversity permitted by loosely linked communication nodes makes them both enduring and adaptive. Ideological motivation may still drive participants in their own spheres of action, but their coordinated activities need not be based on shared ideological understandings, or even on common goals. Moreover, unlike old-style coalitions of convenience, virtual activists need not be located in the same place or even threatened by the same root problem.

COFFEE ACTIVISM

An interesting example here is the North American Fair Trade coffee network, a broad collection of activists dedicated to creating a fairly priced market for coffee grown by small producers in various parts of the world. According to the activists, small farmers are rapidly being driven off their farms by price systems that favor large industrial growers who, not incidentally for our story, also tend to replace shaded coffee plantations with larger acreages of cleared land. For agribusiness interests, cutting the shade canopy means growing more robust beans that can be tended with more mechanized farming. For environmentalists and conservationists, this means killing species of songbirds that migrate from southern forests to North America each year.

The North American Fair Trade coffee network is currently led by a coalition of three organizations that have little in common ideologically. Yet they have developed a campaign to pressure American coffee retailers to subscribe to fair trade business standards and to promote fair trade coffee in their advertising and marketing. The following capsule account of this network follows an analysis by David Iozzi (2002), a student who has studied the network in detail. The three hubs of the coffee network are Global Exchange, a world development and social justice organization based in San Francisco; the Audubon Society, a national bird watchers and conservation organization with a staff person in the Seattle office dedicated to the campaign; and the Organic Consumers Association, an organic and health-food association based in Minnesota.

Global Exchange has developed a set of business standards suitable for North American coffee companies and, to secure compliance, has designed a campaign that threatens corporate brand images. This *logo campaign* (Klein, 1999) recognizes that complex political and economic arguments are hard to communicate across the identity boundaries of ordinary people who are most concerned with the quality of their immediate lifestyles. Enter the Audubon Society, which provides a "lifestyle symbol" for the campaign: birds. The Audubon Society is a credible information source for the claim that cutting the shade canopy to plant hardier, more economical Robusta beans destroys songbird habitat, thus reducing the numbers of songbirds migrating to the backyards of North America. Here we have a symbol that easily connects an aspect of many North American lifestyles (pleasant singing visitors in millions of parks and backyards) with corporate images of coffee as an integral part of a satisfying consumer lifestyle.

How were songbirds connected to a corporate logo? The initial target of this campaign was Starbucks, a Seattle-based international company that successfully marketed its coffee as an upscale lifestyle brand. Not just a hot caffeinated beverage (which would be difficult to sell at premium prices in far-reaching markets), a cup of Starbucks is worth far more when understood as a lifestyle experience. Entering a Starbucks puts one in a quiet world with quality product, surrounded by quality people, soothed by demographically chosen music (which can be purchased for home listening), and tempted by kitchen coffee gadgets to recreate the Starbucks lifestyle experience on mornings when one has the luxury of staying in.

Killing the songbirds that chirp in the backyard on that special Starbucks morning is not an image that the company wanted to have associated with its lifestyle brand.

It did not take the company long to do the math. Today, Starbucks has extended its brand to include the fair trade logo that appears on some of its coffees. It even displays humanitarian posters in some (test-marketed) locations, explaining the company's dedication to paying a fair price to the small growers who produce the high-quality beans on which the company's quality product depends. Thus, a political message that might not have penetrated the personal-symbol world of average consumers was attached successfully to a common consumer experience and, eventually, embraced by one of the chief corporate purveyors of that experience.

Typical of many protest networks, the organization and communication activities of the campaign were accomplished mostly through the Internet. This is where the Organic Consumers Association (OCA) comes in. The OCA powers the website through which protest activities are scheduled, organized, and scaled worldwide. For example, OCA labor makes it possible for Starbucks customers (both actual and potential) to find the campaign and to e-mail their indignation directly to Howard Schultz, founder and major shareholder of Starbucks, along with other company executives. What is the OGA's problem with Starbucks? Not the disruption of small farm economies. Not the threat to bird populations. Rather, Starbucks has been using genetically altered soybeans in its vegan lattes, and milk with bovine growth hormone in its cappuccinos. The OGA was able to attach its political messages to the fair trade and songbird discourses as people were brought through its website in the process of getting information, registering a virtual protest, or finding out about actual demonstrations.

As Starbucks expanded its locations around the world, the protest network followed with demonstrations. The OCA website announced that the Global Week of Action against Starbucks (February 23–March 2, 2002) led by the Organic Consumers Association was a success, with demonstrations held at over 400 Starbucks locations worldwide. OCA described it as the largest simultaneous global protest event of its kind in history. The demonstrations attracted activists motivated by one or more of the network causes. Despite the ideologically inchoate network, the collective negative focus on the company image (reinforced by a number of news reports linking the demise of songbirds to the coffee business) was enough to convince Starbucks management that its precious brand image was better served by embracing the activists' demands than by resisting them. In this fashion, network actions travel through time and space, following global targets while accommodating activists' diverse political identities and local community ties.

Redefining Political Time and Space: New Venues for Contesting Power

For many global activists, the boundaries of the personal world—social, political, and geographical—are fluid. Global problems can be found in virtually any locality—from the life conditions in export processing zones created in Mexico or Indonesia by distant corporations, governments, and trade regimes, to the loss of migrating songbirds in American and Canadian backyards. Beck (2001) has argued that both the arenas

and forms of politics have been dispersed as economic restructuring has given business unusual degrees of power over domestic labor, environmental, tax, and social welfare policies. Threats to move elsewhere, close plants, and shift capital markets have been legitimized by world trade agreements, creating a sphere of what Beck calls "subpolitics," in which important issues are removed from national institutional agendas. As a result, national election and legislative calendars may be less important for activists to follow than the schedule of World Trade Organization or G-7 meetings.

New communication technologies enable this resistance to occur in new temporal and spatial terms. Part of what made the "Battle in Seattle" during the 1999 meetings of the World Trade Organization such a signal event was the simultaneous staging of dozens of other demonstrations around the world. M. I. Lichbach and P. Almeida (2001) document demonstrations concurrent with Seattle in at least eighty-two other cities, including twenty-seven locations in the United States, forty in other "northern" locations including Seoul, London, Paris, Prague, Brisbane, and Tel Aviv, and fifteen in "southern" locations such as New Delhi, Manila, and Mexico City.

The Internet was important not just in the organization of simultaneous protest; it contributed to the global imaging of those events. Demonstrations were linked by streamed Indymedia reports by activists themselves—reports that tied the activists together in a virtual political space. Mass media reports of the various local demonstrations put them in the context of the global event that shut down the WTO meetings in Seattle. Thus local actions were re-imaged in global network terms both for the activists and for the various global publics who witnessed them.

The capacity for simultaneous membership in local and global community again implies that old Gramscian notions of class and group foundations of consciousness and resistance must be refigured. Mittleman describes the technological refiguring of space, time, and social identification in communication terms:

Contemporary social movements simultaneously occupy local, national, transnational, and global space as a result of innovations in, and applications of, technologies . . . which produce instantaneous communication across traditional frontiers. . . . The Gramscian framework of resistance thus must be stretched to encompass new actors and spaces from which counterhegemonic consciousness is expressed. (Mittleman, 2000: 169)

At least three distinctive aspects of this cosmopolitan consciousness are associated with the global contention of power. First, and most obvious, this resistance is less distinctively nationalistic than global in character—what Mittleman (2000: 169) terms "collective resistance transcending national borders." Second, the collectivism of this movement is less rooted in ascribed (Gramscian) social group memberships than in individual choices of social networks. Finally, this "collective individualism" is facilitated in part by discourses conceived less in ideological terms than in broad categories of threat, harm, and justice.

Deemphasizing ideological discourse also enables communication with broader "lifestyle publics" (Bennett, 2003b). The public political vocabulary of this movement is laden with *memes*—easily imitated and transmitted images that cross social networks because they resonate with common experiences, from enjoying the beauties of nature