



## Defining Democracy: Coalition Politics and the Struggle for Media Reform

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The corporate consolidation of media has sparked a national bipartisan coalition struggling for media reform. This article attempts a critical overview of this phenomenon by analyzing its works and words to date. I argue that media reform has activated large numbers of people around vital but seemingly esoteric issues, and, in the process, has synthesized communication research and action for the democratic control of media policy. But this battle also exposes several potential limitations. In particular, I examine the populist nature of the media reform coalition's attempt to be a "nonpartisan democracy movement." Such an approach assumes an inevitable progressive basis to bipartisan coalition not demonstrated by historical examples. Further, this organizing model prioritizes formal institutional decisions at the expense of what is perhaps the media's greatest power: their ability to shape meaning through content. I conclude by analyzing several alternate models of media activism which join policy with production and forcefully articulate media reform as a vital component of broader struggles for social justice.

The mass media have long concerned those who study or participate in social movements. Whether as a hegemonic system blocking social change or a vital mechanism through which movements spread, the mass media have long been held to play a vital role in the formation, maintenance, and

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Date submitted: 2008-02-01

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dissolution of social movements. Within the realm of politics and social movement analysis, such a focus on mass media has led several scholars to emphasize alternative media as the solution. These studies of radical papers and Web sites, of radio stations and public access television, position alternative media as a democratic and oppositional journalism, lacking a mass audience but providing the necessary counter-narratives to those espoused by the dominant mass media (e.g., Atton, 2002; Halleck, 2002).

The focus on alternative media provides a counterbalance to mainstream media—an alternative way to view dominant media power now and historically (Curran & Seaton, 2003). The rise of new media technology, centrally the Internet and the many things digital communication enables, has sharpened such a focus within the academy but also among various social justice movements (e.g., Atton, 2004; de Jong, Shaw, & Stammers, 2005). As with earlier forms of alternative media, these new models are also said to provide a different perspective at the level of both narrative and representation. Such media efforts have been examined largely in relation to emergent social movements: labor and antiwar; environmental and queer, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender; feminist and antiracist.

One need not focus on alternative media production alone to examine the relationship between contemporary social movements and the media. The 21st century has also given rise to an organized focus on media policy itself. Catalyzed by the corporate consolidation of media ownership, the struggle for media reform has channeled citizen outrage into petitions and protests, lobbies and letters, aimed primarily at thwarting, stopping, or reversing the deregulation of media ownership laws. It has also, as participants are quick to note, forged a coalition, bridging traditional distinctions of Left and Right. This battle against media deregulation is headquartered in the United States, though its impact could easily reverberate globally, given both the globalization of media companies and policy and the fact that U.S.-based companies are the primary advocates of such consolidation practices (Costanza-Chock, 2005; Herman & McChesney, 1997). Alternatively self-described as a movement for media reform or media democracy, this coalition has appealed to millions of people, getting them involved in the picayune and legalistic details of media policy on seemingly esoteric but vital issues such as Internet neutrality<sup>1</sup>, copyright law, and, centrally, media ownership rules. Yet the success of this coalition seems predicated on its avoidance of the fundamental roots of media power: namely, how the media engage and create culture, representation and meaning.

Media reform has achieved a measure of visibility at an interesting moment. New communication technologies have brought unending fascination with the power and possibilities of media across many sectors of society. Such technologies have played vital roles in the globalization of both corporate capital and human solidarity (Dyer-Witthford, 1999). At the same time, the compression of time and space has renewed claims that the current moment is not only postmodern but post-ideological, post-partisan and even post-political (Bauman, 2000; Beck, 1997; Giddens, 1994; for a critique, see Mouffe, 2005). Particularly within the United States, the contemporary era is said to be marked by waning interest or involvement in politics. Such claims have had many expressions, ranging from the dystopian claim that

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<sup>1</sup> Editor's Note: See *IJoC's* Special Section on Net Neutrality:  
<http://ijoc.org/ojs/index.php/ijoc/article/view/192/100>

Americans avoid or are prevented from political and social interaction (Putnam, 2000) to the surprising study finding that even people involved in civic associations avoid political talk (Eliasoph, 1998). Into this dizzying mix comes an intentionally eclectic mobilization, positioning itself as both nonpartisan and progressive (McChesney, 2007, pp. 164-168) in its fight to democratize the processes by which media policies are made.

This focus on policy is not entirely new. As several scholars have documented, the 1930s witnessed impressive mobilizations over the shape and control of radio broadcasting (McChesney, 1993; Newman, 2004) and commercialism (Stole, 2006). The current phenomenon is distinctive for developing an infrastructure whose end goal is the transformation of media policy. Here is a movement which neither concerns itself with coverage nor lumps the media in as part of a corrupt capitalist system. Rather, media reformers insist that changing the structure of media policy will serve as the lynchpin unlocking positive change in media content, which itself will yield positive changes throughout society. It is an interesting, if not uncomplicated, proposal and one worthy of deeper investigation.

Below, I endeavor to survey this movement, analyzing its strengths and weaknesses from a perspective rooted in theories of communication, political practice, and social movement formation. As a visible, in some way nationally coordinated phenomenon targeting the structure of media, the struggle for media reform and democracy is less than a decade old. It is therefore to be expected that it has generated more pleas and polemics than critical investigations. Eric Klinenberg's *Fighting for Air: The Battle to Control America's Media* (2007) is the first to chronicle both corporate media consolidation and its discontents, although it builds off of Robert McChesney's work on both fronts (e.g., McChesney, 2007; McChesney, 2004; McChesney & Nichols, 2002; Nichols & McChesney, 2005). Engaging in an overview of media reform activism presents some uncertainties over who and what merits attention. By the "media reform movement" (or the "media democracy movement"),<sup>2</sup> I mean those groups and individuals whose primary political goals target the regulations governing media institutions. Though promoting a vision of media localism, these organizations tend to be focused on national regulations, primarily those of the Federal Communications Commission, as well as Congressional funding for public broadcasting and the malfeasance of corporate media. National non-profit organizations, mainly Free Press (created by McChesney, along with progressive journalist John Nichols and activist Josh Silver), occupy a central position in the thinking, actions, and visibility of such activism. Along with Free Press, national media

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<sup>2</sup> Breitbart (2007) distinguishes between three wings of the media movement: media democracy ("be the media"), media reform ("reform the media"), and media justice ("radically transform the media"). These distinctions are quite useful in highlighting the different approaches of media activism — including alternative media, policy work, and a hybrid of the two rooted in anti-racist, feminist politics. While I agree with Breitbart's basic categorization of the tactical and strategic differences, I depart from his labels: groups like Free Press have described their work interchangeably as both "media reform" and "media democracy," making such a semantic distinction impossible. McChesney (2007), for instance, forcefully articulates media reform as fundamentally a democracy movement. Thus, I will use both "media reform" and "media democracy" interchangeably to refer to the activism aiming to influence media policy.

reform organizations include the Consumer Federation of America, the Consumers Union, the Media Access Project, and the Center for Digital Democracy.<sup>3</sup>

Besides individual organizations, media activists have formed several broad national coalitions, including SaveTheInternet.com, StopBigMedia.com, the Media and Democracy Coalition and the Future of Music Coalition.<sup>4</sup> These and similar entities represent a central tendency in the thinking and framing of media reform to date. Through them, media reform has been positioned as a democratic movement for control of media policy. My focus here is mostly on the national work, political vision, and common-sense assumptions articulated by these bigger organizations and coalitions, though I recognize the great variability by location. The analysis I offer below builds off the actions and descriptions of the media reform movement as it has constituted itself to date. Because the potentials of media reform have received more attention in what has been written, the below assessment gives more emphasis to the challenges which emerge in evaluating these expressions of media activism, in hopes that such an overview might contribute to a sharper articulation of social movements centered on communication.

It is too simple to point out that a victory for media reform tomorrow would be insufficient to solve the world's problems, or even the media's. But the structure and articulated vision of a political coalition bespeaks its hopes and the possibilities it seeks to actualize. So it is on this ground — that is, taking the movement at its word — through which I analyze the struggle for national media reform. While a specific consideration of genre and cultural policy is outside the scope of this article, I argue below that the national media reform coalition is hampered by pursuing a strategy oriented around FCC liberalism and economic arguments while ignoring media texts and rituals. I conclude by discussing other contemporary attempts at media-based activism that orient their struggles for democracy within a framework of expanding social justice. These efforts are arguably more reminiscent of media activism in other countries, where challenging media content is fundamental to battling authoritarian control of both the state and the market.

### ***The Appeal of Media Reform***

Media reformers have contributed positively to the American political and intellectual landscape. Intellectually, media reform provides relevance to communication scholarship, as well as a clear outlet for students and scholars of media and communication to practice what they research by intervening in public debates with specialized knowledge of the field. Such developments increase the relevance of communication as a discipline and productively erode the boundaries which often separate academics from their subjects of inquiry. For McChesney (2007, p. xvi), whose scholarship is a passionate testament to

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<sup>3</sup> The Web sites of these respective organizations provide a wealth of information. See the Center for Digital Democracy, <http://www.democraticmedia.org>; Consumer Federation of America, <http://www.consumerfed.org>; Consumers Union, <http://www.hearushow.org>; Free Press, <http://www.freepress.net>; and the Media Access Project, <http://www.mediaaccess.org>

<sup>4</sup> The respective Web site for the first two coalitions is included in the name. For the Media and Democracy Coalition, see <http://www.media-democracy.com>. The Future of Music Coalition Web site can be found at <http://www.futureofmusic.org>

media reform, the current moment allows communication scholars to participate in reinventing the field while expanding democracy and public life through both applied research and political action. The National Conference for Media Reform, sponsored by Free Press, has brought together policy makers, politicians, professors, news workers, students, and celebrities. Since the first conference in 2003, each iteration has involved more participants and received a higher profile.

Based partially on the knowledge of communication scholars and media professionals, media reformers have outlined a vision of a media system that includes 1) universal and ubiquitous Internet access; 2) ownership policies to promote a truly competitive media market; 3) “a viable heterogeneous tier of noncommercial and nonprofit media, especially at the local level, with particular emphasis on policies promoting journalism”; 3) limited commercialism, especially in children’s media; and 4) a “media system that actually informs citizens about candidates at election time” rather than relying on paid, often vitriolic, advertisements (McChesney, 2007, pp. xiii-xiv). These activists focus especially on the adverse effects of concentrated media ownership. To illustrate this point, they point to an array of factors, including the avowedly conservative orientation of conglomerates across media venues. Besides this conservatism, media reformers challenge the dearth of local programming and attacks on public radio and television broadcasting.

Politically, media reformers have highlighted the constructed nature of any media system. Doing so has shattered the illusion of inevitability promoted by free-market ideology. McChesney has been particularly forceful in advancing this argument — declaring, for instance, that “our communication system as a whole is not primarily the result of geniuses and free markets. It is the result of structures and markets created and shaped by policies and extraordinary public subsidies” (2007, p. xii; see also McChesney, 1999; McChesney, 2004; Nichols & McChesney, 2005). Simply knowing the role of the market in building and maintaining the current structure of mass communication does not automatically lead to a more democratic media system. But such knowledge is fundamental to creating a different model.

Similarly, working to democratize the media brings together a variety of social actors that might not otherwise form coalitions. Carroll and Hackett (2006) identify three sources of media activism: media workers and researchers, subordinate social groups, and “diffuse sectors for whom communication policy and practices are not a central concern, but who may occasionally mobilize around perceived threats that commercialized media may pose to humane, non-commodifiable [sic], democratic values” (ibid., p. 85). They therefore see media activism playing a vital role in facilitating progressive action more broadly, noting that successes in the realm of media open the door for other movements to have more access or to become better represented. Media activism, then, can serve as “a sort of meta-movement across more issue-specific struggles” (ibid., p. 93). Here, they speak not just of the policy focus, but the range of media activism. Klinenberg (2007, p. 201) lists some of the many examples: “volunteering to assemble wireless networks, teaching classes on ‘media literacy,’ forming watchdog groups to monitor news and entertainment content, producing independent journalism about under-reported topics, and simply writing letters to express concern about proposed media policy regulations.” The national media reform coalitions have sought to merge these activist initiatives in a shared strategic focus on regulating media concentration.

The potential for such broad success can be seen in two signal achievements of media reform: the struggle over media ownership and the ongoing battles for Internet neutrality and universal Internet access more broadly. These fights are two sides of the same coin in the effort to stop corporate media consolidation. In 2003, the FCC failed to push through an attempt to relax the rules governing media ownership, in large part due to tremendous public outcry in a variety of forms and spaces. The widespread opposition to the proposed deregulation and the zeal with which then-chair of the FCC Michael Powell attempted to secure its success also generated a public split among FCC commissioners. The two Democrat-appointed members of the five-person commission opposed the measure and lent their voices to the various town meetings and public protests against the plan and their three Republican colleagues who supported it, derided its opponents, and largely avoided any open discussion (McChesney, 2004, pp. 252-297). Media reformers also have been able, thus far, to prevent telephone and cable companies from creating a tiered, privatized system of Internet access through the SaveTheInternet.com Coalition (Klinenberg, 2007, p. 200; more generally, see Chester, 2007).

In both cases, media reform advocates have mobilized thousands of people in events and public forums, and millions of people through e-mail appeals, to pressure officials in the FCC and Congress to support greater regulation of media ownership rules, support public broadcasting, and prevent the creation of consolidated Internet access. Although neither issue is settled, media reform activists have provided vital interventions and won impressive victories on these and related issues. Part of their success has been the ability to wage campaigns and hold events which serve to get critical media attention of the very ownership policies that rarely appear outside of the business pages.

Numerous groups not traditionally associated with media issues (or with one another) have joined in these fights — including such strange bedfellows as the National Rifle Association and the National Organization for Women, the Christian Coalition and MoveOn.org, the Parents Television Council and the Public Interest Research Group. Each organization joined out of recognition that media policies impact a range of issues and actors; a wide array of groups saw media consolidation as a significant enough threat to their political self-interest to motivate a broad bipartisan coalition. This coalition exemplifies ingenuity in making issues of media control and concentration central to public policy debates. It is unlikely that an issue other than media would have brought such groups together. While these decidedly disparate groups first joined forces to oppose the proposed FCC deregulations in 2003, they have continued a loose network of collaboration which has succeeded in making such convoluted policy proposals like net neutrality a widespread political concern. "In all the years I've been [in Congress], I've not seen such deeply held feelings across ideologies," Democratic Senator Barbara Boxer said of the public outcry for media reform (quoted in Klinenberg, 2007, p. 201).

Boxer's enthusiasm is noteworthy, especially since it is a rare national politician who has spoken out in support of media reform. Senator Bernie Sanders (I-VT) has been the most stalwart supporter of media reform in Congress, as was Senator Paul Wellstone (D-MN) before his death. Several celebrities, including prominent journalists such as Phil Donahue and Dan Rather, and celebrities such as Geena Davis and Jane Fonda, have spoken at media reform conferences. Most politicians, however, have been more muted, though the bipartisan outpouring of support for policy reform might serve to bolster their stance. Still, Boxer's excitement should not lead us to conclude that the media reform coalition is either

unprecedented or unproblematic. Next I examine the political basis of the media reform coalition to critically engage the challenges it presents.

### ***The Challenge of Media Reform***

In crafting a strategy for media reform, activists self-consciously looked to the environmental movement as a model, using rhetoric about public health and well-being as justification for change (Klinenberg, 2007, p. 15). With such discourse and a concomitant call to let the public decide, media reformers exhibit a globalization-era brand of political populism. Media reform can be seen as a collective response to neoliberalism that neatly inverts its logic: both media reformers and neoliberals cast their efforts in relation to the holy quest for profits, viewing that single-minded devotion either negatively or positively as so potent an ethic that it overrides traditional notions of political identity or affiliation. This approach leaves untouched fundamental aspects of media power — such that, were the current national agenda of media reform to prevail, the media system would, in all likelihood, remain unjust. I explore these themes in greater detail below. By examining the structure of the national media reform coalition, I seek to provide a richer notion of democracy than the one put forth by populist appeals. I also discuss some vital issues of media power that are left unaddressed by the current strategy of targeting ownership policies.

#### *Democracy, Populism, and Coalition in a Globalist Era*

Despite its victories, both the rhetoric and the strategy of media reformers give reason to pause. In particular, I want to examine its claim of organizing a “progressive and nonpartisan” movement for democracy. This proposition needs to be thought of in the context of what media reformers advocate and in relation to what such an approach leaves out. This claim has two fundamental flaws that render it an inappropriate designation. Rhetorically, it elides fundamental questions of the coalition’s structure and purpose. Strategically, it is unclear that this partnership can be considered progressive, if we take democracy to include the caliber of political decisions and not just how they are made.

Nothing about the structure and demands yet advanced by the central media reform organizations would suggest that this is a struggle to forge political alternatives outside of the existing two-party system. As such, the media reform coalition seems more properly classified as bipartisan rather than nonpartisan. The latter term would suggest non-parliamentarian social movement forms calling to expand the structure and possibilities of politics writ large, whereas the former takes for granted the legitimacy of the current establishment. A bipartisan strategy relies on uniting existing liberal and conservative constituencies for the purpose of tweaking some aspect of the current established system so that it can function along the same path, only “better.”

Given that the bipartisan organizing for media reform broadly stakes its claims on behalf of “the people,” we can see it as populist in nature. Margaret Canovan, Chip Berlet and Matthew Lyons (2000, p. 4) offer a usefully expansive definition of populism: “[A]ll forms of populism ‘involve some kind of exaltation of and appeal to “the people,” and are in one sense or another antielitist.’” These themes are then used “to mobilize a mass constituency as a sustained political or social force.” Populism can be

progressive or reactionary; often both elements coexist, since by definition populism is oriented first and foremost to “the people” rather than a given ideology or set of politics. Populist attempts at universal appeal have made such movements almost inherently unstable and open to being rearticulated from Right to Left or, as is perhaps more often case, vice versa (Allen, 1983; Hall, 1988). The increasing polarization of wealth enabled by neoliberalism renders such populist appeals more dynamic, but hardly more progressive (Mouffe, 2005). A bipartisan coalition advocating for “the people” might easily engage in a dangerous rightward shift in order to accommodate its conservative members. And, as decades of conservative appeal has revealed (McGirr, 2001), a sizable percent of “the people” might see their needs met through reactionary social programs.

When examined more closely, the coalitions forged to press for media reform are not as surprising or novel as they may first appear. Recent U.S. history has witnessed several coalitions of strange political bedfellows crossing traditional political divides for short-term goals. Among media reformers, the standard example is the early environmental movement, but there have been other, more troubling examples. These include the union between Christian rightists and feminists opposed to pornography, as well as the broad coalition which formed to oppose Planned Parenthood’s successful attempt to expand the RICO conspiracy laws in an attempt to thwart antiabortion protesters (a move many civil libertarians opposed as constricting a wide range of dissent).<sup>5</sup>

The shifting allegiances made possible by the rapid spread of communication technologies have increased the centrality of media in approaching the political landscape of what has been called late modernity (Bauman, 2000). Media affect everyone, and thus, reform activists argue, traditional Left-Right boundaries ought not to matter. In this way, the media democracy movement resembles what political theorist Chantal Mouffe (2005) characterizes as “post-political” projects: the flawed and false notion that the current stage of modernity has surpassed our old understandings of political formation. In its effort to transcend political divisions of old, this attempt to move “beyond Left and Right” misses a whole range of political expressions and forfeits the potential to develop alternative options. This approach minimizes the stakes of politics as the struggle and practice of shaping how society functions overall. Rich, deep histories of social movements aiming to expand or contract the possibilities of culture and politics demonstrate that the poles of Left and Right, while contingent, stand for vastly different approaches to organizing society. Joining forces may have its logic for the purpose of short-term political gain, but this route would seem untenable or counterintuitive for the long-term without a deeper political shift which engages, if not questions of Left and Right, at least the substance of what those political labels signify.

To be sure, media reformers have identified and targeted worthy adversaries in the FCC and the big media companies to which the FCC is seemingly beholden. In challenging these entities, media reform has brought together an eclectic, otherwise adversarial mix of organizations. It has, in fact, made such a coalition its calling card to such an extent that universal appeal subsumes any attempt to engage questions of political substance. The Free Press action guide, printed as an appendix in *The Future of Media*, provides the text for a speech or newspaper article on why media reform matters to a certain group; the text leaves space for one to “insert your priority issue or value here” (p. 361). While motivated

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<sup>5</sup> I thank Matthew Lyons for drawing my attention to these examples.

by sincere intentions, such a cookie-cutter approach only confirms that communication matters. It casts its net so widely as to remove politics almost entirely, including questions of content and representation. This concern — of what does and does not appear in the media, and how — is often the compelling reason that draws people to care about media. Yet it is a highly politicized concern, and thus one that varies widely from, say, the Christian Coalition to the National Organization for Women. It is only by avoiding questions of content — the very issues which serve as motivating forces for most people in thinking about the media — that this bipartisan coalition has taken shape. As a result, “the media” becomes such a meta issue that the vital concerns which comprise the coalition’s component parts fall out of the equation.

On deeper consideration, however, the bipartisan structure of the coalition may not be as critical a dimension of media reform as several proponents argue that it is. The leading theoreticians, researchers, and proponents of media reform are overtly liberal or radical (e.g., Robert McChesney, John Nichols, Bill Moyers, Danny Schechter, Josh Silver, Noam Chomsky, Ralph Nader, Eric Klinenberg, Ed Herman, the contributors to Free Press’s 2005 book, *The Future of Media: Resistance and Reform in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, and so on.). While conservative columnist William Safire wrote several articles decrying greater consolidation of ownership in the 2003 FCC fight, and while heads of conservative organizations involved in the reform coalitions personally spoke out or penned protest letters at the time, the public face and scholarly research of media reform have been decidedly progressive, even as it asserts its political neutrality. Thus, its ostensible “nonpartisan” character, which was always more appropriately bipartisan, seems more rhetoric than descriptive. It is unlikely, for instance, that someone such as conservative activist and Parents Television Council Executive Director Brent Bozell would agree with McChesney’s (2007, pp. 45-77) explicit combination of Marxist economic analysis and liberal political philosophy as the rationale for media reform.

The reasons *why* organizations support media reform may be just as telling as the fact that they do — for it may also reveal some of the tensions and competing visions among the groups that comprise the coalition. Championing the unity of the coalition makes a political point out of what for many groups may have been a temporary decision made of expedience. As a result, there are already signs of dissension from conservative members of the coalition who feel misled. Cliff Kincaid (2007, 2008), director of the conservative group Accuracy in Media (which opposes what it sees as the liberal bias of American media), argues that the National Conference on Media Reform silences conservative people and ideas, and is overrun with liberals who wish to regain their control of the American media. Rhetorical flourish notwithstanding, it seems clear that organizations come together out of self-interest vis-à-vis particular, media-related policies that affect them rather than a commitment to democracy, per se. Most coalitions form out of the immediate, not necessarily aligned, interests of participating groups. So it is neither surprising nor abhorrent that this would happen with issues like net neutrality, where the vast majority of the Internet-using population stands to lose something as a result of the avarice of the telecommunications industry giants. But casting such a defensive move against corporate consolidation as democracy’s full flowering seems hasty, both as a politic and in terms of the actual nature of media reform activism.

Media reformers have articulated a demand for a restructured media system, but aspects of the coalition are otherwise at odds about almost every other issue. In bringing together opponents of

neoliberal economics, which includes many far-right organizations, the media reform movement is not anti-ideological. Rather, it is one political expression of organizations and individuals opposed in part or whole to a neoliberal media system. The columns William Safire wrote in *The New York Times* in 2002-2003 cast his opposition to media moguls as the highest expression of federalism and fiscal conservatism (quoted in Klinenberg, 2007, pp. 230-233), and other conservative criticisms of media policy similarly reflect right-wing ideas. Likewise, liberal members of the media reform coalition argue their position in line with their political ideals. Thus, the media reform coalition rests on the unity of self-interested, ideologically committed (though politically divergent) organizations — under a banner of being non-ideological and bipartisan.

Such unity seems immediately useful and strategically untenable. Fundamentalist Christians, lesbian feminists, libertarian gun enthusiasts, and agnostic social democrats all have different ideas of how society, including its media, ought to function. While they may share a coalition opposing media concentration, they spend the rest of their time actively seeking to undercut the political agendas of their opponents and part-time partners. As a result, attempting to make bipartisanship a defining feature may serve to isolate those who do not want to make coalition with organizations and values they see as inimical to their own programs or identities. There is a risk of valuing bipartisanship to an extent that serves to separate media from society. But even to accomplish this separation for the purpose of coalition requires that strategic discussions of the media be limited to institutional policies rather than content or practice, lest coalition partners disagree. Short-term goals trump long-term vision. Such an arrangement can only last so long.

People of all persuasions can find something disagreeable in “the media” — in a world dominated by representation, this is perhaps the only universal. The conservative movement and groups further to the Right have, in fact, organized their base partially through attacking the so-called liberal bias of American media (as McChesney [2004], argues, among others). To succeed, Mouffe suggests (2005), coalitions must be rooted in shared long-term political visions and commitments. Absent this political unity, coalitions can easily fall apart, turn reactionary, or become rigidly ideological.<sup>6</sup> Compromises constitute any coalition, particularly inside the beltway. But the wider the gaps within a coalition, the stranger or more dangerous the conciliation. These compromises further separate national media reform coalition from the grassroots groups outside Washington D.C. struggling for change in both media policy and practice.

The perils of coalition beg a deeper question of how we ought to define democracy. At the national level, the critique of media power includes both process and politics: that is, media reformers challenge both how decisions are made and what the outcome and impact of such decisions are. Consolidated ownership, say the reformers, is bad for civic practice, and it dilutes political knowledge and artistic creativity by inculcating society with quantitatively more media that say qualitatively less. The

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<sup>6</sup> One can arguably catch glimpses of political backsliding when members of the media reform coalition, such as the conservative Parents Television Council and the liberal-populist Consumers Union, write a joint op-ed pieces criticizing television for having too much sex and violence (quoted in Klinenberg, 2007, pp. 213-214) — a criticism generally associated with cultural conservatism.

suggested alternative vision, however, speaks largely to the process: let the people decide. While it is undoubtedly true that democracy, some measure of popular control, is better and more preferable than authoritarianism of either state or market, the stakes of power are steeper, more perilous, than calls for democracy allow.

Bringing together such divergent groups and then appealing to democracy either assumes that people will naturally choose progressive options or makes peace with a winner-take-all populism. But history is rife with examples of majority rule being used in ways that support structural injustice; white Americans historically have used majoritarian rule and widespread support to justify lynching, anti-immigrant violence, limited suffrage, curtailed employment, and segregation in housing and education. People can “democratically” decide to do the most undemocratic things; in the realm of the press, many whites democratically decided to destroy abolitionist or black-run papers, along with other publications expressing views not held by, and often threatening to, a majority population (Nerone, 1994). This is a deliberately provocative example, but I think the point is clear: a focus on process fails to address many fundamental questions of political practice, vision, and power. Put another way, democracy is not just *how* decisions are made, but *why*, by *whom*, and to *what* effect. Anything claiming the mantle of democracy must include the full political, social, economic, and cultural rights, desires and participation of marginalized populations at the center. Discussions of processual democracy are incomplete without a political democracy that ensures an equitable redistribution of resources. Without a political battle over vision and values, calls for democratization could bolster cultural conservatism, Christian fundamentalism, or class exploitation. A “media democracy” not built around social justice might easily accommodate inequalities of race, gender, sexuality, class, and ability.<sup>7</sup>

Emphasizing democratic process over social justice is reminiscent of the debates generated by public journalism. Public journalism exhorted news workers to reinvent their craft in the public interest. It created a loud, if short-lived, controversy among journalists and communication scholars (see the essays in Glasser, 1999). And like the media reform movement, public journalism achieved its power through appeals to democratic obligations. But, as Michael Schudson argued (1999, p. 131), such appeals have profound limitations: “Admirers of community . . . tend not to dwell on what happens when community values collide or how far illiberal community values are to be tolerated by the public. (Is segregation okay when it has been traditional for generations? Or are anti-sodomy laws acceptable when they express dominant community values?) [Communication scholar James] Carey may be right that liberalism by itself is not a recipe to social progress — but neither is community and neither is democratic participation in itself.” Democracy is absolutely necessary but hardly sufficient.

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<sup>7</sup> Breitbart’s (2007) overview of the 2003, 2005, and 2007 National Conference on Media Reform notes that these issues — slighting the contributions of people of color, women, youth, queer folks, and independent media producers—have plagued the conference from the start. But, he argues, each conference has improved in centering these populations.

*Media Power Beyond Ownership*

The exclusive focus on policy ignores the cultures of both media and politics more broadly. Such an allegation is most assuredly not a call to resurrect the much-beaten dead horse of cultural studies versus political economy. The fractured debates of the 1990s between proponents of these two paradigms did little at the time and would accomplish far less now. It is, rather, engaging the movement on its own terms to raise fundamental questions of normative valuations and political visions. The practice of politics and the politics of media contain cultural dimensions — routines, rituals, ideologies — that are fundamental to the shape and structure of institutions (the literature on this topic is vast; see, for instance, anthologies by Cohen & Young, 1973; Curran & Gurevitch, 2005; Curran & Morley, 2006; Dahlgren & Sparks, 1992, as well as Carey, 1989; Hall et al., 1978). To focus only, or even primarily, on institutional outcomes or decision-making practices is to miss fundamental elements of media power, in and out of the news.

Focusing on policy not only negates other forms of media and news relay (Jones, 2006). It also misses the rituals of (news) media — the routines that media professionals engage in as part of their job description or tradition, regardless of who signs their paychecks. For that reason, Zelizer (1993b) prefers to think of journalists as an interpretive community, a group whose legitimacy arises from the codes, conventions, and stories shared among its members. Likewise, Carey (1986) and Schudson (1995) argue that media is biased professionally more than ideologically.<sup>8</sup> These professional codes are imbued with their own class allegiances, leading Stuart Hall (1982) to describe media as politically nonpartisan but ideologically pro-state. Ownership trends may — or may not — exacerbate these tendencies, but they are by no means responsible for them. Limiting concentrated media ownership does not address vital questions of who is considered a journalist, what issues journalists cover, and how journalism is practiced.

Again, we can see parallels with the public journalism movement. Part of the problem with public journalism, Schudson argued (1999), is that it left journalistic authority unexamined: journalists were called to tweak their profession, not give up or fundamentally alter their power or practice. Likewise, the media reform movement asks precious little of news workers themselves. To be sure, the ranks of media reform proponents include many a practicing journalist or other employee of the dominant media frustrated with the deleterious impact of corporate consolidation. But media reform does not ask journalists to change their ways, nor does it promote alternative media structures as an antidote to troubling conventions in the dominant media. Indeed, media reform advocates point to the ways consolidated corporate ownership has weakened journalism's localism (e.g., Klinenberg, 2007) without assessing how well journalism served given communities before the relatively recent phenomenon of big media giants. The two attributes are related but hardly interchangeable, nor is it sufficient to assume that a change in one would automatically ripple out in the way media reformers have suggested.

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<sup>8</sup> Zelizer argues that "interpretive community" is a better heuristic to analyze journalism than professional community; there is, therefore, a difference between Zelizer's position and that adopted by Carey and Schudson. For purposes of discussion here, though, it is useful to join them: all three scholars oppose giving undue influence to market-based explanations of journalistic practice and prioritize the conventions constituting journalistic practice.

Media reformers have not contested the source of journalistic authority or media power outside the bottom line. As such, the ideological or conservative dimensions of journalism remain uncontested. Without addressing how news is made, media reformers are left demanding that the state tighten the reigns of corporate power without challenging the ways media routines discourage civic engagement, sideline political activism, and reify objectivity and experts (Entman, 1989; Hartley, 1996; Lewis, Inthorn & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2005). Fox News is right wing not just because it is owned by Rupert Murdoch. Its owner, staff, content decisions, and viewers are oriented in some fashion to conservative and reactionary politics — and thus, the station could be taken over tomorrow by the Conservative Union, the Parents Television Council and other members of its large right-wing base with little progressive change (even if some of them oppose Murdoch's efforts to amass even more media outlets).<sup>9</sup> Likewise, the Christian Right (segments of which have opposed consolidated media ownership) has built a sizable international media empire for the express purpose of giving their ideas a wide and uncontested hearing, which includes everything from apocalyptic predictions to sexist procriptions and homophobic rants (e.g., Brock, 2004).

Most basically, I am arguing that appeals to formal governmental and corporate policies are limited without a broader focus on the underlying ideologies and structures which uphold the current arrangement of society, and which are far more determining in the function and orientation of modern communication systems. It is quite likely, as Klinenberg (2007) and McChesney (2007) both argue, that the policies made in the next few years will reverberate for generations, making media structures a fundamental terrain of democratic practice. But without a deeper challenge to the routines and commonsense notions that both uphold the media system and tether it to systems of injustice, progressive media policy may still uphold conservative politics.

Media constitute a crucial site of social struggle, and it is undeniable that their ownership structures reflect a non-democratic tyranny of market forces. But to stop there is to miss what has attracted people to media as a site of struggle since well before the days of media giants: their role in constructing meaning. If, as Eyerman and Jamison argue (1991), social movements are those organizations and individuals dedicated to reshaping the ways people conceptualize and create their world, media play a vital role precisely because of their ability to give form to alternative notions of reality. Meaning is therefore vital to thinking about the media and their ability to cohere groups (identities, communities, societies). Acknowledging the centrality of constructing and contesting meaning suggests that no discussion of media democracy is complete without examining narrative, craft, performance, and

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<sup>9</sup> We can safely assume that groups such as those cited would continue the reactionary representations, selection mechanisms, and coverage styles for which Fox News has become well known. It is true, however, that conservative organizations are not monolithic; despite a shared set of politics on many key issues, for instance, there are significant differences between hawkish neo-conservatives and evangelical Christians. Were the hypothetical example listed in the text actually to occur, there would be some difference between a Fox News run by its current owners than by the Christian Coalition, which itself would be different than a Fox News run by the Parents Television Council. But my point here is that the station would remain thoroughly reactionary regardless.

ideology (Zelizer, 1993). Media content, including the commonsense notions of what news is as well as the creative possibilities of entertainment media, demand that we move beyond reform to transformation.

**Conclusion: Beyond Reform**

Assuming that a victory in media ownership would automatically yield progressive change across the board, the central nodes of the media reform coalition have so far minimized a political commitment to social justice. In adopting this approach, they have ignored questions of meaning. For instance, what sort of democracy do we want and evaluated or changed by whom based on what criteria using what means? What political agenda might simultaneously address inequality in both media and society? Developing this vision would serve as the starting point for discussion and organizing rather than a static blueprint to be imposed.

If the problem with the current media system is both process and outcome, the answer must also proceed along both fronts. While media reformers consistently argue that corporate media does not give people what they want, it may still be true that enough people, maybe even a majority in some communities, want or are at least untroubled by programming that might be considered homophobic, racist, slanderous, or otherwise reactionary. A legalistic policy emphasis skirts the need for thoroughgoing mechanisms for evaluating content and developing community standards. What are we to make of soap operas, professional wrestling, courtroom dramas or any of the innumerable questions of genre that would be untouched by the increased regulation of media companies? Granting that most people care more about local news than professional wrestling, the emphasis on media ownership or even media literacy still does not provide the mechanisms to evaluate, for instance, how decisions of news value are made and might be altered or expanded in democracy ways. It does not create space to challenge the boundaries and practices of professional journalism. Likewise, one could easily imagine media localism in elite suburbs providing cover for conservative momentum. The populist tax revolt and "culture wars" backlash of the past 35 years, both of which have received more than their fair share of support from non-consolidated mainstream media, would suggest as much (Duggan, 2003; Self, 2003). So if the desire is not simply to build putatively democratic mechanisms by which far-right ideologies can achieve hegemony, the media reform movement would do well to articulate and organize around a stronger connection between media democracy and social justice.

To further such connections, some activists have developed what they call a media justice approach. As a political framework, media justice has attempted to inject a more overtly racial justice, feminist politics into the majority white media reform movement. The name was a deliberate critique; in modeling itself after the environmental movement, media reformers made some of the same errors that gave rise to an environmental justice movement: developing strategy, vision, and organizing that ignored or marginalized those populations hardest hit by pollutions of both the natural and mediated environments. These communities were often on the frontlines of contesting such contamination. Environmental justice rejects populism in favor of an explicitly political position that views environmental devastation as disproportionately affecting poor people of color (Cole & Foster, 2000). Likewise, media justice began as a response to the blind spots of media reform activism, which paid scant attention to issues of representation and content, and the ways that the dominant U.S. media has *always* served white

elite interests at the expense of 'others': youth, women, queer and gender variant populations, communities of color, poor and working-class communities. This perspective sees the relatively recent corporate consolidation of ownership as but the latest manifestation of how communication systems reflect and shape broader relations of power.

A media justice perspective emphasizes policies and practices, structures and ideologies. Its roots can be traced back to civil rights campaigners targeting local media outlets for the ways in which white supremacy dictated selection criteria, story framing, and news content (Classen, 2004). Legacies of segregation, replicated and upheld in media content (e.g., Roberts & Klibanoff, 2007), provide further reason to see as incomplete any demands about the media that stop at local control or ignore questions of representation.

Media justice is one example of several attempts to articulate a more defined political critique of media power by joining media production and media policy. These efforts locate media activism in community struggles as much as institutional regulations. Such an approach challenges media power by developing alternative models of media practice while simultaneously challenging the industry giants and their governmental supporters. These challenges are as much ideological as they are institutional; that is, they attempt to wrest some power away from mainstream media as part of overturning dominant values of injustice, not just because of corporate control. Several of these organizations — including the Prometheus Radio Project, Reclaim the Media, Third World Majority, Women in Media and News<sup>10</sup>— have participated in the media reform coalition. But their approach, joining media literacy, media policy, and media production in an explicit social justice agenda, has not defined the movement's national leadership, strategy, or vision. Making this three-pronged approach central to contemporary media activism, however, might have the strongest potential both to turn back the tide of deregulation and to develop a mass movement capable of creating a different media system as part of a different social structure.

Such efforts have made big strides toward addressing some of the rituals of journalism. Media justice activists Hunter Cutting and Makani Themba-Nixon's edited volume, *Talking the Walk: A Communications Guide for Racial Justice* (2006), provides skills for and case studies of orienting the media toward social justice — and in the process, it provides readers with knowledge of what journalistic practice currently looks like and how it might look different. Oakland's Center for Media Justice, formerly the Youth Media Council,<sup>11</sup> has combined content analysis (monitoring mainstream media) with policy reports, direct action, and alternative media production (Cyril, 2005b; Klinenberg, 2007, pp. 217-220). The focus on using media to build grassroots organizations for racial and economic justice, mark a qualitative difference between the Center for Media Justice (CMJ) strategy and that of the national media reform groups, even if the Center is part of the reform coalition. Coming to media activism from a racial and economic justice perspective, organizations like CMJ situate their work as part of a struggle for self-

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<sup>10</sup> These organizations can all be found online. See Prometheus Radio Project, <http://www.prometheusradio.org>; Reclaim the Media, <http://www.reclaimthemedial.org>; Third World Majority, <http://www.cultureisaweapon.org>; and Women in Media and News, <http://www.wimnonline.org>

<sup>11</sup> The Center for Media Justice Web site is <http://www.centerformediajustice.org>

determination. The stakes are higher and more urgent because media are connected to pre-existing political concerns. "For many of us, media reform is more than a fight for our media, it is a fight for our lives," said CMJ director Malkia Cyril at the 2005 National Conference on Media Reform (2005a). Media are inseparable from other struggles for social justice, not just because a victory in one arena would trickle down to others, but because systems of representation are inextricable from the practice of power (Hall, 1982). Tackling policy absent representation, absent meaning, sidelines crucial attributes of how power constitutes itself.

Several organizing projects have availed themselves of new media technology to build a network model of organizing for social and economic justice. While not all of these projects fashion themselves as "media justice" organizations, they are motivated by similar concerns. In Philadelphia, the Media Mobilizing Project (MMP) has brought the skills of media (especially video) production to cutting-edge grassroots groups in the field of labor, housing, and education in an effort to bolster the political effectiveness of those groups on the frontlines of contemporary urban social justice. Central to that success, according to MMP, is the creation of a media infrastructure that enables dispossessed populations to share their stories in the process of building social justice organizations.<sup>12</sup> In the heart of Appalachia, the multimedia organization Appalshop produces radio programs, documentaries, theater, music, and books for and about the cultures and struggles of the region's impoverished constituencies. Established as part of Johnson's War on Poverty, Appalshop's organizing employs media as both skills building and political struggle. The same can be said of the People's Production House, an organization based in both New York City and Washington, D.C., that works with youth and community groups to develop media content, analysis, and policy.<sup>13</sup> These and similar projects oppose corporate consolidation, but also seek to build a public media infrastructure based on alternate notions of journalistic practice that are rooted in an explicit commitment to social justice campaigns: for quality public education and worker unionization, against gentrification and criminalization. By joining media reform and social justice, these organizations challenge the boundaries of professional journalism through developing the production skills and political vision of those populations most marginalized by the contemporary media environment.

Struggling over media is not just "fighting for air," as Klinenberg poetically puts it — it is fighting over air quality. In the contemporary media environment, air is ubiquitous: from blogs to newspapers, radios to television, podcasting to magazines. Simply gaining control of air does not account for the pollution emanating from the attendant structures and rituals. It does not equip people with the tools to produce a higher caliber of air or evaluate what counts as quality air. The past decade has indeed witnessed an outpouring of public interest in media issues. But if it is to last beyond the next round of FCC hearings — and if it is to have a progressive impact on media systems under a Democratic administration — it seems vital that media reformers articulate their concerns and fashion their demands in relation to the structures of dominance, the routines and ideologies, which comprise the building blocks that enabled the frightening phenomenon of consolidated media ownership to emerge.

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<sup>12</sup> I thank Media Mobilizing Project (<http://www.mediamobilizing.org>) organizers Nijmie Dzurinko, Mica Root, Shivaani Selvaraj, Phil Wider, and Todd Wolfson for their conversations with me about their work.

<sup>13</sup> I thank Joshua Brietbart for alerting me to the work of the People's Production House (<http://www.peoplesproductionhouse.org>). The Appalshop Web site is <http://www.appalshop.org>

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