



Special Section on Media Reform

Introduction

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It is an increasingly accepted truism that media are the creation of a complex array of actors working to shape policies and representations alike. In the past decade, a broad coalition of groups and individuals organized under the banner of media reform have achieved prominence as one such force attempting to exert power over media. These reformers have targeted ownership policies that have, they charge, privileged profit over quality, allowing large media corporations to blossom while sacrificing original, creative, and useful content. Advocates of media reform have crossed Left-Right divides and provided, perhaps, the most tangible political outlet for communication scholars in the history of the field, directly applying wisdom from the academy to the “real-world” of policy.

This section — among the first in-depth scholarly examination of media reform — brings together scholars and activist-intellectuals (in and outside of the academy) to examine the media reform struggle. We organized this special section to investigate the ideas and actions of this political project. We wanted, in particular, to examine its origin narrative at a time when the movement appears to be gaining even greater traction as issues like “net neutrality,” low-frequency radio, and other questions of media access are pervasive in popular, scholarly, and activist spheres. Our own political commitments are explicit in our articles that follow, such that while we have an appreciation for the goals of media reform, we are also hesitant about the means and methods of achieving such change. Some of the issues raised in our discussion call into question the overarching goals of the media reform movement. It is our hope that this special section contributes to a fuller, critical evaluation of this movement’s strengths, weaknesses, and possibilities within the field of communication. The authors involved in this roundtable, representing some of the leading and emerging voices in communication theorizing media activism and democracy, speak to

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a range of issues and concerns raised by and within the media reform movement, including its ethical dimensions, its efficacy in coalition-building, its treatment of identity, and its theoretical and methodological frameworks for social change.

The symposium kicks off with articles by the two of us, Dan Berger and C. Riley Snorton, doctoral candidates at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. Precisely because we are interested in the possibilities of media reform as a vibrant element of social change, we were intentionally eclectic in soliciting a wide range of voices, which speak to issues of media, democracy, representation, and political engagement. Our respondents are prominent figures in the world of media reform and the field of communication. We are honored to have the participation of John L. Jackson Jr. (University of Pennsylvania), Robert W. McChesney (University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana), Makani Themba-Nixon (The Praxis Project), and Peter Dahlgren (Lund University, Sweden) to help deepen our inquiry of the media reform movement. With cultures, ideas, and technologies circulating the globe with greater ease than ever before, we hope this special section complements the conversations underway in the many arenas where questions of media reform are of vital importance.