Theorizing "Lay Theories of Media":
A Case Study of the Dissent! Network at the 2005 Gleneagles G8 Summit

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Drawing on "active audience studies" and recent theories of mediation, the concept of "lay theories of media" is proposed as a means to understand how social movement actors think about and interact with news media as part of the "practice" of activism. The argument is made via a case study of the Dissent! network using data gathered from participant observation in the planning and enactment of protests at the 2005 Gleneagles G8 Summit in Scotland and 30 semi-structured interviews with activists. This article argues that Dissent! activists approached Gleneagles with existing knowledge and experience about news media and demonstrates how these "lay theories" informed their activism. The conclusion stresses the utility of "lay theories" in analyzing how perceived knowledge about how the media function influences or underwrites political activism.

Introduction

This article is based on the premise that social movement actors have theories about how the news media work and that these "lay theories of news media" inform, influence and underwrite the practice of activism directly and indirectly. To make this argument and develop the concept of lay theories of news media, a case study is presented of a specific autonomous network—Dissent!—which planned and carried out protests at the 2005 Gleneagles G8 Summit. Specifically, this article analyzes Dissent! activists' "lay theories of news media" and considers how such theories impact the "practice" of activism by social movement actors in an age of media saturation[1].

A New Media Environment

Much of the early scholarship on the relationship between social movements and the media conceptualized mass media—television, radio newspapers—as the only players comprising the mass media arena. And, for a time, they were. However, the rise of information communication technologies (ICTs)

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has unquestionably challenged the monopoly of power held by mass media. It has provided social movements with an alternate means for mobilization, communication and representation. The rise of ICTs has also reconfigured the contemporary media landscape, making media environmental (Silverstone, 2007). In this media environment, social movements do not opt to engage with only "old media" or use only "new media." Instead, both tools and logics are present and inform the larger "practice" of media-oriented activism (McCurdy, 2009). Therefore, references to the news media or mass media made herein treat traditional "mass media" in their converged, digital and social form as part of a broader media environment.

Mass media remain an important site of struggle. Scholars who have chronicled the rise and use of "image politics" (DeLuca, 1999) have largely focused on the actions and media strategies of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) such as Greenpeace (e.g., Anderson, 1997; Carroll & Ratner, 1999; Gaber & Willson, 2005). Although important, such organizations often have a dedicated, professionally trained staff and, in some cases, vast resources allowing the execution of complex media campaigns and events. Less academic attention has been given to the media strategies of "autonomous" or "horizontal" networks, the kind that have been active in the global justice movement (GJM).[2]

Despite this lack of research, the media strategies of autonomous networks are particularly interesting, as the activists involved are not salaried professionals, nor do they necessarily possess specialized training in media. While horizontal, anarchist or autonomous movements likely have a variety of "professionals" in their ranks who volunteer their time and skills, these networks also have many "amateurs." Here *amateur* is meant in the original French sense of the word to describe committed individuals who follow a pursuit, often without remuneration and/or formal training. These amateurs draw on their individual and collective knowledge and experience to inform and orient their actions.

Studying the media strategies of autonomous movements is also interesting because these networks do not necessarily have a formal media strategy. Instead, as was the case with Dissent!, a media policy had to be developed by its members. This feature of autonomous politics affords an interesting opportunity to consider how knowledge, or at least perceived knowledge, about how (and why) the news media function has transcended the specialized fields of media studies and media practitioners and is folded into activist knowledge and practice.

Social Movements as Producers and Audiences of News

Social movements have, for some time, critically analyzed the role of the dominant media institutions. Rucht (2004) offers a particularly interesting macro-level analysis of activist media strategies, from the 1968 student movement through to the global justice movement. In his assessment, Rucht (2004, p. 37) proposes the "attack" strategy as a means to account for the development of "explicit

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[2] This is not to argue that the GJM is comprised exclusively of such organizations, but instead is a messy pastiche of networks and organizations that has its share of "professional" entities such as international NGOs, organized labor, and political parties, as well as horizontal, anti-capitalist, and autonomist networks (Juris, 2008; Smith, 2008).

critiques of, and even sometimes violent action against, the mass media." Rucht focuses his analysis on broad movement strategies as opposed to activists' individual understandings and interactions. Rucht, along with other scholars, also acknowledges that social movement actors have become savvy toward their position as "unofficial" news sources and the boundaries of, and opportunities afforded by, this status (Anderson, 1997; DeLuca 1999). Focusing on global justice activists, Juris (2008) argues convincingly that summits such as the G8 afford opportunities for ritualistic media "performances" of direct action. While insightful, Juris leaves considerable room to consider in greater detail the media practices of such activists.

A call for more research into activists' media strategies is contained in Cottle's "How Is Media Awareness and Reflexivity Built Into the Tactics Deployed by Demonstrators and Their Subsequent Interactions With the News Media?" (2008, p. 864). Cottle's title question is based on the assumption that media awareness and reflexivity is built into the theorization of activism. Yet a review of the literature within social movement and media studies points toward a dearth of scholarship that could articulate the reflexive awareness that social movement actors have of media.

Activists' reflexive awareness of media stems not only from their position as sources involved in the news production process, but also in their position as "active audiences" of the news. The turn toward "active audience" research acknowledges the ability of audiences to recognize, and even play with, the conventions and "seriality" of media content (Liebes & Katz, 1990, p. 143). Philo (1990) examined how audiences understand and internalize dominant representations of news. He argued that while audiences may forget the exact details of a story, they have a strong understanding of the central themes of news, an understanding that Philo attributed to the "cultural knowledge" (1990, p. 134) of audiences. While helpful, Philo's concept of "cultural knowledge" is a theoretical black box with the processes and repertoires of understanding never explored. The concept of lay theories, as will be argued shortly, affords a means to consider how media-related knowledge informs not only the consumption of news by *audiences*—as in Philo's work—but, at the same time, how such knowledge may inform or underwrite the ways that social movement actors conceptualize and present their actions to the media as *news sources*.

Seiter (1999) is perhaps the best-known, and indeed one of only a few scholars within media and communication to explicitly use the concept of lay theories. Focusing on media consumption, Seiter (1999, pp. 58–90) presents an ethnographic study of "lay theories of news media effects" most notably held by parents and teachers on the impact of media on children. True to past active audience research, Seiter's nuanced analysis links audience's lay theories of news media effects with their social positions of gender and class. With the focus now on social movement actors, this article seeks to theoretically combine the position of audience member and news source and acknowledge the reflexive interaction between them through the theorization of activists' media practices.

The "Practice" of Activism and Lay Theories of Media

Mediation may be seen as a multilayered social process that social actors are both immersed and engaged in as part of life in the media characterized by the (re)construction, (re)circulation and (re)consumption of symbolic forms. The experience and actions of social movement actors within this

environment may be analyzed by studying their media-oriented practices. Drawing from a wider body of practice theory (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 1996; Warde, 2005). Couldry (2004) introduced the concept of "media-oriented practices" as a way to shift the focus of media research from direct relationships with media texts, such as the proving or disproving of the "effects" of media, to a more general focus on the impact of media on everyday life and the "ordering" of social practices toward the media and by the media.

Practices depend upon shared skills and understanding. Reckwitz views a practice as:

> . . . A routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to
> one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, "things" and their use,
> a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and
> motivational knowledge. (2002, p. 249)

Practices are not standardized across social movement actors. Instead, a practice—its understanding and performance—may differ between individuals based on knowledge, skill, past experience or similar factors (Warde, 2005, p. 4).

This article focuses on the practice of activism in the context of a specific act of contention: the 2005 G8 Summit. The present analysis is interested in a specific component of that practice—understanding of media—which may be situated as part of "background knowledge" (Reckwitz, 2002). Given the declared interest in media, conceptualizing activists' "lay theories of media" provides a necessary degree of specification absent in previous studies and places this understanding within the practice of activism. Moreover, the emphasis on practice also provides a means to combine the theoretically bifurcated positions of activists as *audiences* of news and *actors in* the news and theorizes how knowledge and experience gained from various social roles and positions can reflexively inform the undertaking of activism.

Lay theories of news media are defined as theories or understandings expressed and/or enacted by social movement actors concerning the functions and motivations of news media; how news media operate, what drives them, and theories concerning how the logic of news influences the representation of reality. The use of "lay" should not be taken as a judgment on, or belittling of theories expressed by activists. Following Furnham and Cheng (2000), the category of "lay" is used to distinguish, compare and place the articulations of social movement actors alongside the published "professional" or "academic" understandings of media in order to consider the range and orientation of beliefs that inform the practice of activism.

In this study, "lay theories of media" conceptualizes the ways in which social actors understand the modes, motives, and impact of media. It is important to assert that lay theories of news media are not necessarily academic theories, but may be informed by them. Giddens has argued that "the theorizing of human beings about their action means that just as social theory was not an invention of professional social theorists, so the *ideas produced by those theorists inevitably tend to be fed back into social life itself*" (1984, p. 27, my emphasis). Thus, the objective at hand is not necessarily to give credibility to "lay

theoretical frameworks" but to recognize that they may exist and inform the actions of social movement actors.

A concluding reflection is required concerning my role as an academic, activist and the relationship to the conceptualization of lay theories of media. The concept of lay theories of media emerged from direct activist experience in autonomous global justice networks whereby activists I was involved with—and those in this study—held and acted upon refined understandings of media that exhibited parallels to existing academic approaches to the study of news media. However, as the previous section argued, while academic literature has documented many aspects of the news production process and its impact, current literature has largely failed to consider what such knowledge (actual or perceived) looks like, and how it may impact the practice of activism. Accordingly, it is recognized that "lay theories of media" presented are, in fact, academic theory in its own right conceptualized as part of the practice of activism.

Methodology

This article is based on research conducted following Burawoy's "extended case method" (1998), which endorses a qualitative approach to social research characterized by an appreciation for context and a goal of building on social theory. Data was gathered from one year of "theory-driven participant observation" (Litcherman, 2002) within Dissent! in the planning and enactment of protests at the 2005 Gleneagles G8 Summit. Arguments are also based on the qualitative analysis of 30 semi-structured interviews conducted with 24 participants (six participants were interviewed twice—before and after the G8 Summit—accounting for 12 of the 30 interviews). Interviews were transcribed and then analyzed via a process of "thematic coding" (Flick, 1998). As practices are discernible through their enactment, this research takes an active interest in the "media-oriented practices" (Couldry, 2004) of social movement actors as articulated by the actors themselves, as well as what is evident in their actions and in the discourses of movement documents and through participant observation.

The particularities of the "lay people"—the activists—in this study must be recognized. Those involved in Dissent! may be seen as having a stronger interest and involvement in politics. Moreover, the issue of interacting with mainstream media—"the media debate"—was a source of contention within Dissent! and is a regular feature of autonomous politics within the global justice movement (McCurdy, 2010). Accordingly, the culture of activism was conscious, and as will be argued, critical of the mainstream media. While the gender distribution was equal, activists in Dissent! were largely middle-class and university educated, endowing activists with certain discursive resources. The social position of activists and the "awareness" of media in activist culture should not overshadow the general argument of lay theories but should illustrate the importance of appreciating context in studying and making any claims.

Recognizing the position of activists as sources of news and analyzing their understanding of news from the perspective of news literature is appropriate. To create such a framework, categories have been taken from an academic perspective on news media allowing for the juxtaposing of "lay theories" with "expert" theories in order to consider the crosspollination of the two and the degree to which any common knowledge of "lay" activists resembles expert arguments. To accomplish this, Tumber's (1999)

categorization of literature within the sociology of journalism was used, as it represents a comprehensive review of key literature. While Tumber divides theories of news into five overlapping but analytically separate categories, three of his categories are used: (1) economics of news, (2) production of news and (3) defining news, with the last category exploring three interrelated aspects of newsworthiness. These categories were selected because they were the most prevalent groupings of theory within activists' discourse. Literature from Tumber's two categories that were not used (Sources of news; Objectivity and Ideology of news) informs this article, and is incorporated where relevant under the other headings.

Lay Theories of News Media: Perceptions of How the Media Works

This section analyses Dissent! activists' "lay theories" of media with a specific interest in how the pressures and processes involved in news production are understood. The theories presented herein must be contextualized within the political framework of Dissent! with its "anti-capitalist" roots in the British environmental direct action movement. Dissent! was envisioned by its members as a non-hierarchical network comprised of organizations, autonomous collectives, and individuals and its structure carried forward the organizational model of loose, purpose-oriented networks that have mobilized around international meetings since the late 1990s.

Dissent! activists approached the 2005 Gleneagles G8 Summit with existing knowledge, experience and assumptions about how news media function. Such lay theories of the media are significant because of the critical function of news as a space for understanding the world as well as a site of struggle over the ways in which the world is presented and understood (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993; Silverstone, 2007). It is activists' lay theories of news media that underwrite how they think about media, the news they receive through media, and the people or events they hear about through media. Moreover, it is activists' lay theories of news media that also underwrite how they, as social movement actors, conceptualize, justify, and present their actions to the mainstream media. Lay theories are presented below in three overlapping categories based on Tumber's (1999) division of the sociology of journalism: (1) Economics of news, (2) Production of news, and (3) Defining news.

Economics of News

Theories about the influence of economics over the news and news processes have long been the focus of academic attention. Academics writing within this tradition view the quest for financial and political gain as the twin fuels driving the news engine (see Gans, 1979; Golding & Murdock, 2000; McChesney, 2000).

The political and economic motivations of media were the most frequently cited influence over the news by interviewees. When asked about the motivations behind news selection, Allan responded:

> I suppose there are different reasons for different journalists but, I would say, obviously
> how much money it is going to make them. I mean, we live under capitalism; every
> media institution is trying to make money. So what's going to sell, that's the biggest

thing. Which is why a newspaper might have, you know, have Michael Jackson kiddie-
fiddling in the newspaper as opposed to a poor person who just died in Argentina.
(Interview with Allan,[3] February 4, 2005)

While the juxtaposition offered by Allan was the strongest among the interviewees, there was a collective sense among those interviewed that news was selected and reported—particularly by the tabloid press— to maximize sales. Tom described tabloids as engaging in a "competition among themselves" in an effort to "outdo" each other (interview with Tom, July 8, 2005). Two interviewees suggested that the focus on profit also influenced the news process by way of advertising. It was suggested that media organizations may downplay, bury, ignore or even censor news stories that might jeopardize a large advertising account. A common interviewee perception was that media outlets would not publish stories in a manner contrary to their own financial interests or the capitalist system within which it is embedded. As a consequence of their political orientation, interviewees felt that anti-capitalists would not receive "fair representation" (Sarah), particularly in privately owned news media, that were believed to report the news to suit their own political and financial interests. This parallels academic arguments made by Bell (1991, p. 38), among others, who views news as subservient to the business interests of news media. Such arguments bear a strong resemblance to the critical and political economic perspectives expressed by popular public intellectuals within the global justice movement, such as Noam Chomsky (Herman & Chomsky, 1988), Naomi Klein (Klein, 2000), and Robert McChesney (McChesney, 2000), suggesting that variations of these views have permeated the common knowledge of global justice activism.

Production of News

Academic research into how news is produced and the impact this has on output may be traced back to the beginnings of the sociology of news paradigm. Research in this area has theorized the impact of "gatekeepers" (Kielbowicz & Scherer, 1986; White, 1950), particularly editors. It has also explored the impact of both time and cultural constraints embedded in the routines and practices of journalists on the news-making process (Gans, 1979; Golding & Elliot, 1979).

From the perspective of those interviewed, lay theories about the production of news covered ideas pertaining to how the news is created and what factors or actors are believed to influence the news process. There was a strong resonance between the economic theories discussed above and their influence on the news process. Editors and the process of editing were believed to have the biggest influence over both the content and shape of news. Many interviewees viewed editors as "gatekeepers" (White, 1950), with two interviewees (Megan, Neil) suggesting that editors may withhold or "sit on" news stories at the request of media owners, the government and/or big business. In claims similar to Ericson, Baranek, and Chan (1987), editors were also viewed as cutting the news to fit in line with the editorial position of the organization. This point is eloquently summed up by Barry, who commented ". . . At the end of the day, the story becomes the story of the person who is the media, so to speak, not necessarily the story of the person who is telling it to the media" (interview with Barry, August 7, 2005). The lay

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[3] The names of interviewees quoted in this article are pseudonyms.

theory inherent in Barry's remark is one that views the media and those who work for the media as wielding significant symbolic power over those whom they represent.

Many interviewees differentiated between "good" and "bad" journalists. Bad journalists were usually those who wrote sensational stories at all costs or worked for a tabloid. Good journalists were sympathetic to the movement and its ideology and often from ideologically sympathetic news outlets. While "good" journalists existed, interviewees believed that their autonomy was constrained both by editors who dictated the angle of a story, as well as the cultural practices and demands of the capitalist media "system." This is captured in Scott's comment:

> I am sure . . . there are good journalists; there are some very good journalists, even in the mainstream. . . . I think there are decent . . . principled journalists who are working within a system that sets constraints on them themselves. (Interview with Scott, March 31, 2005)

The constraints Scott refers to include the financial and gatekeeping pressures already mentioned but also carry over into newsworthiness—discussed below. The differentiation between good and bad journalists also displays a more nuanced and informed view of mainstream media than is usually accredited to social movement actors and the GJM specifically. Snow (2003, p. 111) polemically argued that within the global justice movement it was "cool" to hate the mainstream media, yet this perspective clearly shows that differentiation *does* take place. Even granted that judgments about who are good and bad journalists are wed to the politics of the media outlet and of the activists themselves, it still militates against the notion that all activists take a blanket and unrefined view of corporate media. Lastly, it provides insight into lay theories of news media that appreciate the levels and hierarchies involved in news production and particularly the influence of editors over journalists.

Defining News: Aspects of Newsworthiness

There is a large body of academic research devoted to analyzing newsworthiness and news values (Bell, 1991; Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Gans, 1979). This section offers a sense of the attributes Dissent! activists felt that media looked for in their selection of news and focuses specifically on violence and sensationalism.

When asked what the media looked for in a news story, or what made a "good" news story, interviewees predominantly responded with a collection of adjectives. Newsworthy stories were seen as "exciting" (Miriam), "topical" (Adam) and offering either "new" information, or information in a "new" light (Megan, Miriam, Sarah). Stories that were "exclusive" (Adam) or involved "sex" and "scandal" (Miriam) were also identified as being newsworthy.

Harry, an independent journalist, suggested that the news media look for heroes and villains, as well as controversy, violence, disruption, political suicide and conflict (interview with Harry, August 8, 2005). Guy proposed that media were interested in three general types of news stories, "Conflict, human interest and animals . . . I am not sure that there are many other stories . . . that journalists tend to go

for" (interview with Guy, April 21, 2005). A link between Harry and Guy's positions rests in the emphasis placed on conflict. Conflict, and particularly violent conflict, was cited across interviewees as a theme that frequently attracted media attention and was seen to be particularly relevant to the newsworthiness of Dissent!.

Violence

Violence or even the possibility of violence has been acknowledged by academics as a principal attribute of newsworthiness, particularly related to the activities of social movements (Ericson et al., 1987; Gitlin, 1980; Philo, 1990). Within activist and scholarly discourse, there are debates around the definition of violence and, for example, whether or not its understanding should be limited to describing intentional harm against individuals or be extended to cover assaults against property.[4] Moreover, the appropriateness of "violent" tactics (both the harming of individuals and damaging of property) is also an important topic of debate and contention. While such debates are crucial to activism, of interest at present are activists' perceptions around the media's interest in violence. As outlined below, media were seen to take a generalizing view of violence that combined the threat of property destruction with the potential for public harm.

For example, Neil believed reporting on conflict (anticipated or actual) was always given high priority in covering anti-capitalist demonstrations, "If [the media] can report on anarchist violence . . . they will" (interview with Neil, April 6, 2005).

Interviewees' frequent references to the media's interest in violence may be linked to their interpretation of trends in media, particularly tabloid coverage. For some, this is supplemented by the direct experience of being interviewed by the media. Sarah's account of an interview she gave to the BBC's Good Morning Scotland in April 2005, two months before the G8 Summit, illustrates this:

Sarah: It was a *hard* interview.

Patrick: What was [the interviewer] talking about?

Sarah: Violence. Do you condone the violence? Do you condone the violence? Do you condone the violence? Yes, what about the violence? We're not here to talk about what the police do, we're here to talk about the violence. . . . Four or five times she asked me. . . . I'd had a . . . chat with the producer the night before and he had given me a list of questions they were going to ask, and then they didn't ask them. So I was, you know, I was a bit lost, basically. I was really prepared and I'd had all these briefings about we don't want to do stuff [like] that; we want to talk about the issues. . . . They didn't listen to that. And it was at half [past] seven in the morning and I was sitting in the

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[4] For a review of debates on violence, see Juris (2008), especially pages 164–167.

> bloody field in a car in a field freezing, stinking this poor man's car up.
> (Interview with Sarah, April 27, 2005)

While Sarah had prepared for an interview based on conversations with a BBC producer, the actual interview was monopolized by an overbearing interest in "violence." Sarah's case exemplifies how direct media experience can be (re)incorporated into activists' lay theories of media. The interview taught her a valuable lesson in the workings of media, a lesson that was then incorporated into her understanding of media in subsequent interactions. This example also parallels the arguments of both Philo (1990) and Couldry (2000), who acknowledge how interactions with media may augment an individual's understanding of the power and logic of media.[5]

Although the perceived preoccupation with violence was often seen by interviewees as negative, there was a realization that, as Sarah noted, "Without the violence at past anti-globalization summits, I doubt very much that [demonstrators] would have got so much media coverage" (interview with Sarah, April 27, 2005). At no point in her interview did Sarah offer an explicit definition of violence. Her implicit approach to the definition of violence parallels Juris' (2008, p. 165) argument that, within the global justice movement, the notion of violence is "generally accepted as a given." While during Dissent! fieldwork and during interviews, activists clearly differentiated between the harming of individuals and the damaging of property, the notion of "violence" was often discussed in the same generalized terms as the media and usually as synonymous with property damage.

Despite the recognition that the "violence" of past G8 Summits secured some media coverage for Gleneagles, interviewees expressed a clear frustration at the media's perceived propensity to magnify and sensationalize episodic pockets of property damage or police altercations but skim over the structural "violence" of G8 neoliberal policies. Thus interviewees viewed the GJM's past use of coercive power and its labeling as "violence" by the media as a source of symbolic power by securing coverage on the legacy of past action, and simultaneously as a symbolic Achilles' heel by tethering the type of coverage that could by achieved to issues linked with violence.

Sensationalism

In an age of commercialized media, the dramatization of news is part of a deliberate strategy by media to attract and maintain audiences. In the context of reporting on social movement activity, Smith, McCarthy, McPhail, and Augustyn (2001) argue that this practice creates a description bias about social movement activity. Activists interviewed for this research expressed similar views, asserting that the drive for profit meant that media organizations emphasized "sensationalism" in selecting and reporting news. However, sensationalism was never fully defined by any of the interviewees. Instead, interviewees would often couple the term with words such as "unusual" (Tom), employ it as adjective to describe a style of reporting, or offer an example of a sensational story or headline.

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[5] Many Dissent! activists heard the interview and spoke to Sarah afterward, so one must recognize the importance not only of direct experience with media, but with indirect experience as well.

Sensationalism was seen by at least one interviewee as a characteristic for which the British press had become "notorious" (Adam). Reflecting on his experiences at the 2005 G8, Harry commented, "This experience has taught me a valuable lesson about the media—they do not care about the truth; they care about the story. How sensational can it be? How controversial?" (interview with Harry, August 29, 2005). Harry's reflections demonstrate the reflexive impact of experience on lay theories and background knowledge. Thus, much like the case of Sarah discussed above, Harry's case illustrates how experiences with media, or at a mediated event, are important episodes that can inform and reshape "lay theories of media" and media-oriented practices more generally.

Discussions of sensationalism frequently referred to the press and specifically tabloids. Sensationalism was articulated by interviewees in two overlapping ways. First, an event itself may—inherently or through its construction—possess sensationalism. Second, sensationalism is a journalistic practice of reporting news events to maximize dramatic narrative. In both cases, sensationalism was viewed as a deliberate journalistic practice that, much like academic claims, was seen to draw boundaries around the type of coverage social movement actors, and particularly "radical" ones, could achieve.

Sensationalism, as a standard journalistic convention, also appeared to be internalized by some interviewees. This was particularly evident when interviewees discussed what they believed constituted a newsworthy story. Megan, an American activist with extensive media experience, suggested there is a clear divide between what does and does not constitute a news story:

> Megan: Thirty people protesting at a [G8] ministerial meeting is not going to get coverage unless they do something that . . . stops the meetings from happening [and] 30 people standing outside an office building with some signs is not going to get much coverage. . . . Because who cares? What, what's the story? Thirty people? Wow! You get 30 people . . . at the ribbon-cutting for, like, the new Sainsbury's or something. Do you know what I'm saying? Thirty people is not a story; 30 people is not media coverage. Thirty people who you know chain themselves to the front of the office building covered in blood and oil—that's a story, but 30 people with some signs is not a story. (Interview with Megan, April 14, 2005)

In her remarks, Megan presents a lay theory of newsworthiness defined by an internalization and acceptance of the contemporary media emphasis on sensationalism and spectacle. Everyday events that take a predictable form are not news; news requires something distinctive. Thus protesting on its own is not sufficient; it must be supplemented with sensational theatrics (blood and oil) and drama (chained to the door).

Megan's claim is significant on two fronts. First, it demonstrates the hegemonic power of the media to not only define what issues become news, but to shape the way in which social movement actors think about what *can* constitute becoming news. A further implication is that the perceptions of what constitutes newsworthiness—their lay theories of news media—may influence how activist actions are conceived and enacted. In other words, as Megan notes above, the activists' approach to an action—being chained to a building, or covered in blood—is not just to make a political point, but to attract media

attention. This suggests that activists within the GJM have incorporated an awareness of the hegemonic rules of mainstream media into their practices. As the next section illustrates, the application of such knowledge is evident in the *media-oriented practices* of Dissent! activists.

Lay Theories in Practice: Media Practices and Dissent!

The core of this article has argued for the conceptual utility of studying "lay theories of media" and illustrated how such lay theories are evident in the talk of Dissent! activists. Lay theories, as noted earlier, form part of the background knowledge of a practice (Reckwitz, 2002). Yet, how these lay theories inform the practice of activism has not been discussed. A detailed consideration of activists' media-oriented practices is beyond the scope of this article and is indeed discussed elsewhere (CounterSpin Collective, 2005; McCurdy, 2009, 2010). Nonetheless, in order to illustrate how knowledge about the news-creation process informs the practice of activism and media activism specifically, two cases are briefly presented. First a "media training workshop" held before the 2005 Gleneagles G8 Summit is discussed, followed by a brief overview of the activities of the CounterSpin Collective at the summit.

"Media Skills Workshop", Festival of Dissent!

From April 6–10, 2005, the Dissent! network hosted the "Festival of Dissent!" in Coalburn, Scotland. Among the festival events was a 90–minute "media skills" session designed and hosted by an Irish collective associated with Dissent! which had dealt with news media during the 2004 May Day protests in Dublin. The session was advertised in the festival guide as follows:

This workshop will go over all the basics needed to work with mainstream national, local and community media as part of an overall Communications Strategy for both the G8 and other campaigns. Issues discussed will include dealing with journalists, how to write a press release that will get replied to and how to do press conferences and publicize events. We will do role-plays of interviews with hostile journalists—"Why are you planning to destroy Edinburgh?" Together we'll work on the basic skills we need to take on the media empire, and much more! (Dissent!, 2005)

The workshop, attended by 20 of the camp's 300 participants, began by discussing the basics of press release writing, offering tips on length, layout and distribution. However, most of the workshop was dedicated to advice on handling interviews in a hostile media environment. This included a role-playing exercise in which workshop participants practiced responding to hostile media questions. There were also practical interview tips for delivering and staying on message.

The ability to write a press release or handle a media interview is a basic skill that for many NGOs is matter of habit. Nonetheless, producing an effective press release or conducting successful interviews requires specialized knowledge rooted in an understanding of media logics, news cycles and values.

Particularly noteworthy is the workshop's emphasis on "hostile" media, predicated on the assumption that journalists will be antagonistic in their questioning and coverage of Dissent!. This

assumption is premised on an understanding—which includes lay theories—concerning how the media work and resonates with the lay theories of newsworthiness and sensationalism discussed earlier.

The workshop also reinforced the importance of personal experience on both lay theories and activist practices, as its content was inspired by activists' interactions with media during the May Day 2004 protests. In developing the media skills workshop, the activists reflexively incorporated their understanding of media into their training with the objective of diffusing this knowledge to improve future media interactions. Moreover, the workshop may also have served as a way to foster or refine lay theories. In fact, there are multiple, overlapping sources and experiences that may inform the understanding and ultimately the practice of activism.

The CounterSpin Collective at the G8 Summit

The CounterSpin Collective (CSC) was an autonomous group within Dissent! that was keen to facilitate interactions between activists and mainstream media during the Gleneagles protests. Members of the CSC interviewed for this research expressed lay theories critical of the limitations and motivations of mainstream media such as those already discussed. However, CSC members used this understanding to underpin their strategy for interacting with mainstream media.

For the CSC, the media space surrounding the G8 was a site of struggle on par and intertwined with more traditional spaces of contention, such as city streets (McCurdy, 2008). Interacting with mainstream media required developing a specific "repertoire" (Tilly, 1978) of media-oriented practices. To that end, the CSC took advantage of the resources offered by the Internet by monitoring articles published about Dissent! using Google News Alerts, researching the article history of journalists who contacted Dissent! and e-mailing letters to the editor in response to inaccurate articles. The CSC also established a "media phone" so that news outlets could easily request interviews with willing Dissent! activists; established a press release issuing service for collectives within Dissent! looking to contact the media; and CSC members gave, where needed, interviews to journalists.

CSC members developed their media-oriented practices with an awareness of, and to adapt to, the logic and demands of media. However, in enacting these practices the CSC was equally constrained by internal Dissent! network politics. Nonetheless, the salient point here is that the *repertoire of media practices* enacted within Dissent!, including the media skills workshop, is based on the accumulation, distribution, and enactment of a media-specific type of knowledge among activists premised on lay theories of media.

The emphasis on media-oriented practices and the specific attention to lay theories provides a means to study both the understanding and related action of social movement activists. Recognizing lay theories as part of a practice also provides a conceptual means to situate and connect the specific practice of media activism within the larger "practice" of activism. The importance of this is magnified given the current theoretical sidelining of mainstream media in social movement research and the relatively disconnected way that new media has been studied as part of activism. Studying these direct and indirect

media-oriented activist practices provides a means to study the overlap between online and offline, mainstream and new media in conducting activism.

Making the Case for Lay Theories of Media

The concept of lay theories of news media and the accompanying emphasis on media practices has been presented to argue that activists take a critically reflexive approach to media whereby their understanding of how the media work (lay theories) reflexively informs and translates to media-oriented practices. The lay theories espoused by anti-capitalist activists from Dissent! were shown to parallel academic arguments often made by public intellectuals associated with the global justice movement, as well as the discourse in media theory.

The discussion of Dissent!'s "media skills" workshop and the actions of the CounterSpin Collective briefly illustrate how "lay theories of media" influenced the way in which activists prepared for the Gleneagles G8 Summit and ultimately the practice of activism at the summit. Lay theories of the conventions and requirements of media were drawn upon to use media and develop counter-practices in an effort to control, counter or at least influence activists' interactions with the media. The findings indicate the existence, at least among activists interviewed, of a body of lay knowledge concerning the way in which media work, knowledge that is disseminated via multiple channels—from common knowledge shared between activists to the publications of movement collectives and intellectuals.

The lay theories analyzed revealed a strong skepticism among activists about the news production process, reaffirming Gamson and Wolfsfeld's (1993, p. 119) findings about social movement actors' attitude toward the media. Yet such skepticism must not be dismissed but *unpacked*. Activists predominantly expressed variations of a political-economic perspective that viewed news media as primarily motivated by profit and therefore adjusting its practices, particularly definitions of newsworthiness, to maximize that profit. In the context of protests against the Gleneagles G8 Summit, issues of violence, sensationalism, and stories were all seen by activists to negatively influence the reporting of Dissent! because of the political and economic agenda of news media.

Arguments over the influence of the profit motive over the selection of news, news production, and reporting have been the subject of academic analysis for more than three decades. From this perspective, activist claims are not necessarily new. However, they are significant for *who is making them*; these are not academics or media "professionals" with specialized training or those who have conducted detailed research into the functioning of news media, but nonprofessionals—committed "amateurs" with an interest in media. This indicates that knowledge, or at least perceived knowledge, about how (and why) the news media function has transcended the specialist fields of media studies and become folded into common knowledge. While there are undoubtedly differences between individual lay theories, the salient point is the existence of such knowledge. Consequently, there is a need for media scholarship to further analyze how this knowledge affects the actions of social movement actors, not only in how they use media, but for their own purposes.

The lay theories analyzed in this article are not exhaustive. Moreover, there is an inevitable variation among social actors with respect to how they understand the way in which media operate. Nonetheless, this analysis has highlighted a range of beliefs about the functioning of news media held by a sample of anti-capitalist activists. The argument for recognizing lay theories of news media as something that informs the practice of activism should not be interpreted as an evaluation of their accuracy. Lay theories are not necessarily correct; they may be based on mistruths and/or misconceptions. Regardless, they still guide action. Thus the relevance of lay theories resides in their influence over how social actors think about and then interact with the media and society.

Lay theories constitute part of the background knowledge of various indirect and direct social practices. This has theoretical implications as to how media scholars view the ways in which social movement actors interact with and through media. Whereas Bennett's (1975, p. 65) analysis of "pseudo theories" covers the way in which people may try to make sense of politics and therefore the actions and messages of political actors (for example, what they said, what they meant to say, what they said really means, the use of spin, etc.), the activist practice perspective and lay theorization of media adds another layer of interpretation to "political consciousness" (ibid). On one level, social actors may try to make sense of the message and related motives on behalf of the politician, and social actors recognize that such messages have been tailored by politicians, through using spin and other tactics involved in the "management of visibility" (Thompson, 1995, pp. 134–148) to not only suit the demands of media, but influence their presentation in media. In addition, this article has argued that social movement actors also try to theorize the way in which the media's processing of events—news gathering, production, representation—further influences outcomes and potential outcomes of the message and portrayal of politicians and political events. This knowledge of media, folded in with the political "pseudo theories," together forms part of the background knowledge of the practice of activism.

The (perceived) awareness of the news production process by social movement actors, and the fact that this knowledge informs both media use and activist practice, challenges the utility of a binary conceptualization of audiences and producers as mutually exclusive categories (Livingstone, 1998, p. 251). More important is recognizing the position of "audience member" and "producer" as different roles or practices that social actors may navigate between in "linked but distinctive moments" (Hall, 1980, p. 128).

Thumim (2007, p. 41) has argued for a shift away from using the terms "producers" and "audiences" as distinct categories because, in the context of her research, ". . . This division becomes confusing when the focus is on one among several ways in which members of the audience have begun to participate in production."

This article exposes similar challenges. Dissent! activists were both audience members—drawing on media for personal use and network-related activities—and were involved in the production process of media content through sending letters to the editor, issuing press releases, giving interviews to the media, and being active players in a news media event. Social movement actors are more than audience members. They produce, interact with, and react to media reflexively with different levels of attention across multiple contexts, yet media studies do not appear to have a sufficient category to capture this. By

shifting the emphasis from audiences (or producers, for that matter) to social actors and in turn focusing on their *media-oriented practices* (Couldry, 2004), activities such as media consumption (being an audience member) or media production may be contextualized and understood within or as part of a larger set of social actions. Social movement actors may be seen as engaging in media-related practices and not simply as either audiences or producers of media.

This article also has sought to make a broader contribution to how the relationship between social movements and the media is studied. Much of the research into the media strategies of social movements has focused on how these organizations—largely NGOs—adapt their practices to suit the media and has sought to document these repertories (e.g., Carroll & Ratner, 1999; Gaber & Willson, 2005). However, this myopic focus on media strategies fails to consider how the larger practice of political activism—and not just interaction with mainstream media—is shaped by an understanding of media.

While the present discussion of media lay theories has been confined to the ways in which a specific group of activists thought about and interacted with the news media, a focus on lay theories of media has the potential to open new pathways in media and communication research. Its relevance rests in highlighting a layer of mediation and a type of knowledge that has, for the most part, been overlooked or relegated to a theoretical black box. The objective in studying lay theories of the news media is not to simply log them, but to develop the concept as a pathway to understanding how perceived knowledge of the way media function influences or underwrites social action in an age of media saturation.

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