media reform
article

Mainstreams and Margins:
A Critical Look at the Media Reform "Story"

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"A compelling story, even if factually inaccurate, can be more emotionally compelling than a dry recitation of the truth.

I have seen how effective language attached to policies that are mainstream and delivered by people who are passionate and effective can change the course of history."

~ Frank Lutz, politically conservative communications guru

The media reform movement, as it has been dubbed by its chief architects, is a textbook example of the importance of mainstream rhetoric in shaping a politically compelling narrative. Clear choices are being made to position media reform as the heir apparent of "American" social movement — primarily via co-architect Robert McChesney's selective narrative of the "critical junctures" that gave rise to the modern media reform movement.

For years, there has been little interrogation of this narrative, or its potential consequences, except in the often marginalized discourse of media justice activists. The reassertion of media justice as a political framework and reference for changing media is, in fact, an attempt to reconstruct the narrative or "critical junctures" leading up to present day media reform work in order to construct a more inclusive and comprehensive framework. Yet, the question remains, why would media reform activists work to carefully craft a story for the movement itself that, at best, obscures its relationship to the movements of people of color, including efforts that formed the very legal and policy foundations of their work today?

Both Snorton and Berger do an excellent job of exploring the context and historical roots of the modern media reform movement.　Berger takes on the nettlesome politics of coalition building for media reform and the decision by leadership to construct an ideologically diverse or "bipartisan" tent around a narrow set of structural issues in media reform — namely, ownership concentration.　As Berger observes:

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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.

Media justice, in many ways, defined its own philosophical and political framework in direct contrast to this notion of "separation." The media justice framework offered by the Center for Media Justice provides a case in point: "Traditional media reform and communications strategies are insufficient to address structural racism in public debate and policy and create a media environment in which campaigns for racial justice, economic and gender equity, and youth rights can thrive."

According to the Center, a "strong and effective movement for media justice" includes efforts "to incorporate media as a tool to reclaim our stories, reframe our humanity, strengthen our campaigns and determine our destinies" (http://centerformediajustice.org/sections/view/framework). Media scholar and long-time media reform advocate Mark Lloyd said in 2003:

I think what is considered the media justice movement is less rooted in the consumer or public interest movement than it is properly rooted in a movement that began with the traditional issues and concerns of civil rights; a movement that is concerned with equality, with political representation, the impact of culture on institutions like media and schools. The fact that we have institutions like *The New York Times*, or The Nation, or foundations that are dominated by people who tend not to be people of color and they do not see people of color as integral to this movement, but they see this "public interest stuff" as separate or important and maybe see this "civil rights stuff" as passé is, frankly, connected. (Themba, 2003)

Snorton explores some of the underlying issues that contributed to the emergence of these divergent frameworks, starting with media reform's dominant narrative of "critical junctures." This quilting together of the story of media reform out of the most mainstream American social movements has, as Snorton observes, resulted in "critical disjunctures," including the lack of acknowledgment of media reform's historical roots in the struggles of communities of color — especially black liberation struggles.

The failure to make these connections has dogged the "media reform movement" for years. With Thomas Jefferson among their pantheon of heroes and the flag as the backdrop, it has been hard for many people of color to comfortably join their ranks.

In addition, for many activists working for racial and gender justice, addressing the way media content defames and denigrates their constituencies is a central part of their media change agenda. Much of the earlier work to reform media (i.e., opening up access, outlet ownership and staff diversity, and increased minority programming on public television) were driven largely by concerns about media representation and content.

Yet, reference to media reform's roots in content work, including the watershed legal victory by the NAACP, the United Church of Christ, and others that forced changes in hiring and reporting practices in Mississippi television journalism, are rarely mentioned by its leadership — and little known by most present day media reform activists. Mainstream media reform groups have, in fact, tried to steer away from issues related to the regulation of content in order to maintain the support of conservative partners and, it would seem, to de-emphasize the more race-inspired critical junctures that helped to forge the media reform movement of today.

Of course, this is not unique to media reform. The issues so effectively deconstructed by Snorton and Berger are manifestations of the traditional political calculus that prioritizes the engagement of middle class whites and renders any issues that might challenge this constituency outside of the agenda. As a result, issues and narratives of racial justice, class oppression, and gender justice (among others) are mostly defined outside of the common ground for coalition building for media reform.

It is a well documented and common quandary: social movements often find it hard to navigate between the needs and agendas of those most affected and political expedience (see Goldfield's work on this, especially *The Color of Politics: Race and the Mainsprings of American Politics,* New Press, 1997 for a broad historical view of these politics and their impact on U.S. policy).

Media reform has struggled with nearly all of the typical challenges in this regard. It has made federal policy advocacy a centerpiece of its change strategy, requiring advocates to invest in attracting powerful allies and adopt "mainstream" issues to get on the national public agenda. Funders have played a significant role in shaping the agenda in a variety of ways, both by providing financial incentives for better representation and diverse leadership *and* making funding decisions that have helped to concentrate resources in institutions whose political frameworks and leadership reify privilege.

Snorton and Berger provide important recommendations on how to move past the box of reforms that warrant attention and implementation. Many of these recommendations draw on the critical work of media justice advocates — advocates who continue to work to build bridges with media reform advocates in order to address these critical disjunctures and reconnect media reform to its more diverse, progressive roots. As we move into a new administration, elected in large part by a diverse majority that defies the traditional political wisdom, perhaps there can be room for rethinking the grand narrative of media reform in ways that reconnect it to the histories and concerns of the communities most affected.

References

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