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# Social Movement Theories and Alternative Media: An Evaluation and Critique

John Downing

Global Media Research Center, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, Carbondale, IL 62901

## The urgent need for a dialogue about concepts

Social movements matter the constructive ones, the dangerous ones, and the confused ones. Their study has taken on considerable life over the past 20–25 years, beginning with the "resource mobilization/rational actor" and the "New Social Movements" schools, and continuing on with the current "Contentious Politics" network, along with studies of solidarity movements (Giugni & Passy, 2001), social networks and movements (Diani & McAdam, 2003), and transnational social movements (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). The journals *Social Movement Studies* and *Mobilization* are significant though not exclusive fora for debate on these issues. The global social justice movement and religious revival movements have been two major contemporary spurs to these analyses.

In the meantime, studies of small-scale alternative media have also mushroomed, albeit more recently still, with book-length studies or essay-collections published since 2000 by Atton (2001, 2005); Rodríguez (2001); Gumucio Dagron (2001); Granjon (2001); Meikle (2002); Lovink (2002); Cunningham and Sinclair (2002); Opel and Pompper (2003); Couldry and Curran (2003); O'Connor (2004); Peruzzo (2004); van de Donk, Loader, Nixon, and Rucht (2004); Langlois and Dubois (2005); de Jong, Shaw, and Stammers (2005); and myself (Downing, 2001). As of 2006, two encyclopedias of alternative media are under preparation by Routledge and Sage, respectively, and a two-volume collection of essays edited by Kidd, Rodríguez, and Stein is being produced by Hampton Press, United States.

This body of work represents quite an explosion of attention to social movement media and provides a valuable mining of them, but its very recency demonstrates how weakly social movement phenomena have registered in the main discursive arenas of media analysis. Previously, contributions such as Halloran et al.'s (1970) *Demonstrations and Communication*; Gitlin's (1980) *The Whole World Is Watching*;

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Corresponding author: John Downing; e-mail: jdowning@siu.edu

Siegelaub and Mattelart's (1983) second volume of *Communication and Class Struggle*; the 1984 edition of my *Radical Media* book (Downing, 1984); and Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi's (1994) *Small Media, Big Revolution* were lonely items on the media studies landscape. Even these were divided between studies of mainstream media coverage of social movements (Gitlin, 2003; Halloran et al., 1970) and studies of social movement media themselves.

Yet, just as in the analysis of transitions from dictatorship during the 1980s and 1990s, the typical divorce persists unabated between media studies research and theory and research by sociologists, political scientists, and historians (cf. my *Internationalizing Media Theory*, 1996). We can see this divorce in two major recent collections on social movements, one anthropological (Nash, 2004) and the other sociological (Snow, Soule, & Kriesi, 2004), as well as in Tilly's recent historical overview of social movements during the past 2 centuries (Tilly, 2004). The two journals mentioned, *Mobilization* and *Social Movement Studies*, rarely focus on media dimensions of social movements.[1] Media and—more recently—Internet issues are referenced, but rarely. Very often, media are defined simply as technological message channels rather than as the complex *socio*technical institutions they actually are. This lens has especially characterized early studies of Internet use in political mobilization, for example, in the notion of cell phone "swarming" (Rheingold, 2003).

Let us briefly note some examples of this tangential attention to media dynamics from three leading social movement analysts. Koopmans (2004) writes:

> … the mass media … may communicate innovations between groups who
> share no social links at all—apart from … the same news media. Therefore, the
> mass media play a crucial (but understudied) role in the diffusion of protest in
> modern democracies. (pp. 25–26)

Koopmans defines media here, implicitly, simply as social movement diffusion channels and merely nods in the direction of serious research into their operation.

Kriesi (2004, p. 86) concludes his essay on the conceptual framework of political context and opportunity, one that plays a leading role in some current social movement theorization, by arguing that this framework needs to be extended:

> … in such a way that it accommodates the role of media and the public space
> [since] … *the structure of the media and the way they operate … affect the*
> *opportunities and constraints under which movements operate.* (Emphasis added)

This is very obviously true. But why, in the gamut of social movement processes Kriesi analyzes, are the roles of media acknowledged but left dangling as though they alone were crystal clear, unproblematic? And why only, by implication, mainstream media?

Snow (2004), writing on the frames that social movements construct and the processes within which they are constructed, writes that:

> … frames are continuously articulated and elaborated during the course of conversation and debate among the interactants within a discursive field …. Such fields emerge or evolve in the course of discussion of and debate about contested issues and events, and encompass not only cultural materials (e.g. beliefs, values, ideologies, myths and narratives, primary frameworks), of potential relevance, but also various sets of actors [who] include one or more countermovements, the targets of action or change, the media, and the larger public …. (pp. 403, 402)

Amazingly, media get referenced here only as part of a laundry list, but *not* as major cultural agents, not as ongoing lifetime articulators and developers of *precisely* the myths, ideologies, narratives, and frameworks which Snow is focusing upon in his argument. Admittedly, in another essay by Gamson in the same collection, the "framing" concept does get harnessed to analyze social movements' need to develop mainstream media strategies (Gamson, 2004), but it seems distinctly odd that the framing activities of social movements' *own* media, whether internally or externally directed or both, are so comprehensively off the map.

My critique here is not meant as academic sniping, harmless knockabout fun though that can be. The gulf between these bodies of research is to the signal disadvantage of advanced theory building and thus, ultimately damaging to public understanding of the full dimensions of democratic process. As I affirmed at the outset, social movements matter: the constructive ones, the dangerous ones, and the confused ones.

I shall therefore focus here on a brief critical evaluation of (a) some key theories of social movements, as they have developed in sociology and political science because of the decline of the New Social Movements[2] school's apogee and (b) certain conceptual assumptions found in current research on alternative uses of both the conventional media and the Internet. This mutual interrogation of both bodies of work is aimed to advance conceptual depth in both.

I need, however, to preface what follows with a very basic observation, namely that more than many social phenomena, social movements, and their media are often fluctuating and transitory and thus especially resistant to ironclad theorizing. They frequently demand the subtlety and delicacy of an Antonio Gramsci or a Williams for genuinely penetrating analysis. Latin American researchers have especially insisted on these issues and on the centrality of *process* in the analysis of social movement media (Gumucio Dagron, 2004; Huesca, 1995; Rodríguez, 2001). So, if anyone reading this is looking for an efficient master key, they need to question the grounds for their expectations.

Indeed, what should we include in or exclude from the social movement category? A national revolution? Fascism? Immigrants' rights campaigns? Campaigns to deny refugees' rights? A local environmental defense campaign? The *cristeros* who sought to defend the Catholic Church against Mexico's anticlerical government in the 1930s? The global antiapartheid movement? Punk rock? Hip hop? dada? The global social justice movement? Human rights global networks? Islamist networks?

Home improvement? The cell phone *morpeg* phenomenon (massively multiplayer online role-playing games)?

For French sociologist Alain Touraine, frequently referenced in social movement analysis, the term "social movement" is almost equivalent to macroscopic social change, almost a hegelian *Geist* working itself out in the ferment of modern society. By contrast, for many contemporary social movement sociologists and political scientists, national cataclysms such as revolutions are outside their analytical compass, part of another professional subspecialization. Although for the New Social Movements school, only certain social movements are normally in focus, such as environmentalism, feminism, or gay and lesbian identity assertion. They typically have zero to say about such "Third World" phenomena as the 20th century antiapartheid movement inside and outside South Africa, or the social explosions that rocked Argentina in the first years of this decade and Indonesia in the final years of the previous one.

Thus, social movements are variously defined, often hard to categorize, and —as a result of their "unconstitutional" qualities—resistant to rigid theorizing. I do not take the position that nominalism is the only adequate approach to their study, only that the application of concepts to their analysis is particularly challenging. Nonetheless, in their various manifestations, social and political movements are clearly central to contemporary political life as well as to earlier modern history.[3] The widespread decay of inherited political institutions such as parliamentary parties and the rise of hard to check transnational corporate power are factors further intensifying the current significance of social movements on the world stage. Media research makes itself look silly if it does not foreground them.

## An untaxing taxonomy of social movement media research

Whereas glibly categorizing social movements has been somewhere between risky and foolish, categorizing research on social movement media is rather plain sailing. As noted, Halloran et al. (1970) and Gitlin (1980) focus on mainstream media coverage of movements. Ryan (1989) and Jensen (2001) address practical ways in which social movement activists can engage with mainstream media to help get their viewpoints across. To date, however, the largest category by far, representing the very recent mushrooming of research activity noted above, is social movement media themselves. Overwhelmingly, this body of literature is composed of case studies, though some engage more or less frontally with conceptual issues.[4]

From a purely analytical standpoint, this taxonomy is very straightforward. From a movement activist viewpoint, however, all three foci flow into and out of each other, and the taxonomy's heuristic value is very fleeting.

## Recent social movement theorization: A terrain for media research

I shall focus here very succinctly on five issues where collaboration between social movement specialists and alternative media researchers would be fruitful and is

urgently needed from both corners: (a) media and social change, (b) political mobilization, (c) framing, (d) networks and audiences, and (e) transnational movements.

## Media and social change

This issue can be addressed quite summarily. Most analysis of social change in media studies comes under three headings: development communication, cultural studies, and political communication. The first focuses mostly on underdevelopment issues, the second on fast-moving styles and cultural trends, and the third on shifts in the formal political arena. A great deal of media studies research, however, presumes a rather stable economic and political environment, which may match United States, Canadian, or European realities at this point in time, but has little purchase on everyday life in large parts of the rest of the world.

Social change is, obviously, at the heart of social movement research, but especially in the rational actor/resource mobilization mode, a great deal of work has had little or no cultural referents built into it, with the result that social movement actors are implicitly construed as operating as though they were mute pieces on a social chessboard, duly anticipating or responding to each other's structured moves. But never communicating in any other fashion, never shaped by the complex cultures they inhabit rather than the rigid social rules they observe. Some recent work in this field has begun to address this anomaly, but primarily and perhaps predictably within anthropology (e.g., Nash, 2004) rather than sociology or political science, where it largely remains a lacuna (but see Williams, 2004; Earl, 2004). A focus on social movement media would go a long way to remedying that omission of basic perspective, especially if the definition of "media" is stretched, as it should be, beyond broadcasting, cinema, print, and the Internet to embrace graffiti, murals, street theater, popular music, dance, dress, and other media of communication.

Correspondingly, social change of a nonincremental variety—think of life in the post-Soviet zone, in Congo, in Indonesia, in Iraq, in Lebanon, and in Bolivia—needs to be placed at the forefront of media research. We need to dethrone from their privileged position the stable replication studies of stable media communication processes in politically and economically stable nations. *Yawn!* Not all significant social change by any means issues from social movements, but they are a core component of that central dimension of our world.

## Political mobilization

Elsewhere, Brooten and I have conducted a fairly extensive and internationally based discussion of Internet and radio uses for political mobilization, and I refer readers to that essay for more detail (Downing & Brooten, 2007). Here, I simply wish to note how this has become *the* Internet and movement politics topic *par excellence* and to indicate some reservations I have on that score.

There is a vision out there that quite extraordinary levels of mobilization are now enabled by Internet use, not to mention cell phone use. I would suggest, however, that if the term "unprecedented" is used rather than "extraordinary," we may get closer to

understanding the actual phenomenon. In the United States, the most cited cases of Internet use for political mobilization are the 2004 campaign for Democratic Party presidential candidate Howard Dean and the 2003 MoveOn campaign against the rush to war against Iraq. However, in both cases, the impact was unsuccessful. Dean was edged out for a variety of reasons, and the war juggernaut sped madly onward.

In essence, I would suggest that it is very nearly psychically cost-free and moreover psychically warming to be able to sit at a terminal doing something else and in the interstices tap out a good deed in less than 2 minutes. The illusion of control is seductive. "Let there be light!" The depth of political engagement entailed is, however, razor-thin, the patient, frustrating hard work of political communication pretty well absent. It is not that e-mail petitions should not be signed, just as you cannot be the only firm not to advertise. But to succumb to their technological fetishization is a grave delusion.

### Framing

Some of the points I wish to make about this concept I have already registered, but given the prominence of discussions of framing in contemporary studies of news media (Reese, Gandy, & Grant, 2003), and of notions of *mise-en-scène* in screen studies, there are obvious opportunities for research cross-fertilization. Noakes and Johnston (2005, pp. 5–7) have drawn a productive distinction between framing issues for the purpose of social movement mobilization and how those issues are framed by potential participants *in response to* frames proposed by social movement leaderships. Or to mainstream media frames. For how social movement media frame issues and priorities for movement activists, for movement penumbras, for the state's surveillance agencies, and for metaphorical passers-by, is just as vital to understand as their relation to mainstream media.

In this connection, I would draw attention to Rodríguez' wonderful analysis of how a video project in a poor neighborhood in Bogotá almost accidentally, certainly unexpectedly, served to lead the women involved in it to *reframe themselves* as active social agents—yet another facet of framing processes in social movement media (Rodríguez, 2001, chap. 4).

### Social networks

Diani and McAdam (2003) have emphasized how social movement research has been one of the factors helping to push traditional network analysis beyond its dyadic and empiricist fixations toward an emphasis on:

> … the inextricable link between social networks and culture … the relationship between the social networks and the cognitive maps through which actors make sense of and categorize their social environment and locate themselves within broader webs of ties and interactions. (p. 5)

Once again, the door is opened to the recognition of mediatic dimensions of social movements and their networks—what, after all, on an ongoing daily basis, are the

likely authoritative sources of these "cognitive maps"?—but no one walks through the door.

However, the study of networks in relation to social movement media is an important avenue to pursue. Studies of fan cultures (e.g., Jenkins, 1992) have shown their importance for certain types of audience research. In addition, I myself have argued elsewhere that alternative media users have been surprisingly understudied to date (Downing, 2003a). A focus on social networks lends itself well to research on social movement media uses, especially if it is not hobbled by rigid adherence to empiricist procedures. Oliver and Myers (2003), despite their commitment to empiricist research methods, bluntly acknowledge the shortcomings of those methods in the analysis of social movements, not least the difficulty of capturing the interaction between media and social protest:

> The models we are working with … are of a particular sort that is rarely attempted in sociology. We are not analyzing empirical data and fitting regression coefficients. And we are not specifying elegant deductive models …. Both of us have done both of these in other works. But … we are struggling with what empirical data patterns actually look like … we have come to recognize that any empirically valid model needs to have a substantial random or stochastic element. (p. 199)

Another essay in the Diani and McAdam collection (Broadbent, 2003), this time on rural environmentalist protest movements in Japan, pushes in the direction of specifying the long-term and short-term social network factors that need to be considered in understanding the trajectories of social movements. In the Japanese case, he argues that in those tight-knit rural communities, or what he terms "thick networks," when combined with a deep-rooted culture of suspicion of external authority, and with a trust in local authority figures prepared to challenge that authority, protest was much more solid and sustained than elsewhere in Japan. He does not engage with media issues at all but his proposal for a comparative analysis of the cultures of networks in relation to social movements is a germinal idea for future research into alternative media users and the interrelated roles of the social networks they inhabit.

**Transnational movements**

In the contemporary arena, these movements are of ever increasing significance and offer the prospect of an increasing globalization from below. There is very interesting political science research on them, notably by Keck and Sikkink (1998), and in the collections edited by Giugni and Passy (2001), and by Khagram, Riker, and Sikkink (2002). In a closely related dimension, Slaughter (2004) has argued for the importance of recognizing, and analyzing, the extraordinary growth of global governance networks. She focuses especially on regulator, judicial, and legislator global networks. She does not examine international police cooperation, which had been in operation for several decades by the close of the 20th century. It is an important facet of the

more general processes to which she draws attention, but at the same time, it is impossible not to be ambivalent, even highly ambivalent, about it. Tarrow (2002), a leading voice in social movement research, concluded in a recent essay evaluating a number of case studies of transnational movement resistance that:

> … shifting from the broad canvas of globalization to the finer fabric of the mechanisms of activism is a step that will take us far in understanding the dynamics of transnational contention. (p. 246)

Yet, neither his study nor the essays contrive to place social movement media within that fabric.

These topics clearly cry out for the analysis of media processes and communication technology uses, but as per the other studies cited earlier, media are only touched upon and that very occasionally. Keck and Sikkink (1998, pp. 19–22) provide three or four very insightful and suggestive pages on information politics in the introduction to their work but then leave the subject alone. The Giugni and Passy (2001) collection on solidarity movements references media four times in the index and the Internet never. And although I and other media researchers have written elsewhere on this topic, especially concerning Indymedia, which is one of the more dynamic innovations in global social justice media use (Downing, 2002, 2003b, 2003c, 2005), at this point the writing is largely descriptive. The vague and heart-warming term "global civil society" may have some utility once defined (Lipschutz, 2005) but can only serve as an initial jumping-off point for more focused analysis. That work largely remains to be accomplished, with the exception of de Jong et al. (2005).

Its virtual absence stands in inverse ratio to its importance.

## Notes

1  For an important exception, see Atton (2003).
2  For my critique of the New Social Movements literature, see Downing (1996, pp. 18–22).
3  For example, the 15th century German Peasants' Revolt, the English Civil War, Latin America's anticolonial revolts of the 1810s, China's Taiping Rebellion in the 1850s ….
4  A further feature of this research is that many though not all of the studies I cited earlier focus upon alternative media experiences in affluent nations. There are others, but often their circulation is hampered by English monolingualism and the regionally limited marketing networks of publishers outside the Anglophone and francophone zones.

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