



Understanding the Media Reform Movement

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When Riley Snorton and Dan Berger asked me to participate in a symposium on the media reform movement, I was delighted to accept.¹ In *Communication Revolution*, I called for the field of communication to take this movement and this historical moment seriously, because, I argued, it was of singular importance for the media, our nation, our shared destinies, and the future of the field. Bill Moyers, one of the outstanding journalists of our times, has characterized the growth of the media reform movement as the most extraordinary political development in the United States in the past decade. Yet, it is striking that many in our field appear almost entirely oblivious to its existence. A trip to one of our major academic conferences is like being put in a "Wayback Machine" to 1997. New technologies are all the rage, but the media reform movement exists mostly on the margins. The politics of our times are all but absent. This is a regrettable, even absurd, position for our field if it wishes to escape the irrelevance that is attached to too much of what we do. There is a crying need for us to research, debate, and understand how this historical moment and the media reform movement relate to each other.

Snorton and Berger have produced thoughtful essays, making provocative criticisms of the media reform movement. They have accepted the charge we put upon our best young scholars to accept no sacred cows and to pull no punches. In this vein, Snorton and Berger raise issues that must be addressed, researched, and debated. It is clear they have a powerful interest in media, democracy, and social change; their hearts and heads are in the right place. These are the sorts of symposia we need to embrace in our journals and at our conferences.

Under ordinary circumstances, I would respond to their essays in kind, and enjoy seeing the intellectual sparks fly. But these are not ordinary times, nor is the subject matter in any way conventional. The times we live in make the issues under discussion of the utmost immediate political importance. This is not a reprise of the cultural studies-political economy debates of two decades ago, when, notwithstanding the importance of the debates, academics stood largely removed from the political

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happenings of the times and could enjoy delivering their body shots in relative isolation and obscurity. This is anything but an academic discussion, as the future of our communication system and, to a certain extent our societies, hangs in the balance. What academics do or don't do can and will have an effect on the outcome in the near term. With this in mind, I will concentrate on two shortcomings I see in these essays — shortcomings that all of us in the field of communication need to consider. In the course of doing so, I will examine what I believe to be some of their most important criticism of the media reform movement. I will also try to clarify precisely the extent of our disagreements on fundamental issues. I do not think they are as stark as Snorton and Berger sometimes suggest.

The first and most important area of concern with these papers is the authors' weak grasp of the current media reform movement. This, regrettably, compromises the power of their critique. We need to get a handle on what exactly the media reform movement is and what it is doing. Eric Klinenberg has provided an impressive start to the project, and I have done what I can as a participant-observer in my books, but we academics are nowhere near to having a coherent understanding of what is going on, and what role scholars can and should play. Put simply, Snorton's and Berger's characterizations of the media reform movement upon which they base their subsequent, if different, critiques come up well short of their marks. This is so because they depend largely on a few "cherry picked" passages from books I have written (while overlooking the bulk of my work that put these passages into context), Web site accounts of this or that group, which they take at face value, and/or conversations with a few self-interested people in one corner of the movement. Indeed, basing a critique of a phenomenon as diverse and complex as the media reform movement almost solely on my work — even if it were accurately presented — and assuming this is the lodestar of the movement is dubious. I am flattered that my work has influence, but I know full well that many in the field, including people at Free Press, the group I co-founded, have read few of my writings, and thus are little influenced by them. Providing nuanced critiques of the media reform movement requires first having a nuanced understanding of the movement itself, and neither of these essays demonstrates this to the detriment of their arguments. To be fair, however, this criticism could be leveled at much of the scholarly research in our field.

The media reform movement has evolved dramatically since I co-founded Free Press in 2003. We have gone from zero to a staff approaching 40 people and a membership of more than 500,000 in half a decade. Snorton and Berger emphasize the singular importance of media ownership to the movement, but that has not been true for years. Network neutrality was not mentioned once at the 2005 second National Conference for Media Reform in St. Louis. One year later, it was arguably the defining issue of the movement. Numerous other key issues, coalitions, and campaigns have come and gone, often with success, yet no mention is made of them in the Snorton and Berger accounts. Their mapping gives no indication of the actual strength and operations of the various groups, and who is getting stuff done and who is not. My sense is that they do not know. In the coming months and years, the nature of the media policy issues that will be battled over and the range of possible outcomes could develop in ways that are difficult to predict. And by going forward, I mean six to 18 months, possibly longer. It is not unrealistic to anticipate Free Press doubling in size in two or three years, if it thinks it can manage the growth effectively. If not Free Press, the balance of the movement may well grow at such a speed. I certainly hope so as we need all hands on deck. This is a dynamic movement in the midst of a critical juncture.

Moreover, the nature of the media reform movement itself is very much in flux. I stepped down as president of Free Press early in 2008 and have stopped playing an active role in the organization for a number of reasons, but primarily because I thought my work there was largely completed, and it was time for me to move on. I have my own criticism of the movement and my own sense of where it should be going, and my view is at odds, to a certain extent, with where the movement has gone and what it is currently doing. I understand why the movement has gone the direction it has: stunning and unanticipated success in Washington has made the movement understandably emphasize inside-the-beltway work because there is a pay-off, sometimes of enormous consequences. I would prefer a more ambitious agenda that pushes the bounds of policy options beyond beltway parameters and emphasizes grassroots mobilization. I believe the movement, specifically Free Press, may have bent the stick too far in the direction of maximizing success in the here and now, but I am a sympathetic critic and entirely support the extraordinary work that Free Press is doing. If someone had told me a mere five years ago that Free Press would have the profound influence it is having today in Washington, I would have dismissed the comment as a mark of insanity. The important point here is this: I do not think what Free Press is doing is sufficient to encompass the full range of media reform activism, or media activism *writ large*, that is necessary. So I write this response to Snorton and Berger, not as an apologist for the status quo, but as one eager for a lively and informed debate on vision, strategy, and tactics. This is a movement that needs informed criticism and support from academics.

It is because of the difficulty of researching a dynamic, contemporary social movement that other scholars and I have engaged in the historical analysis of other movements for media reform to get a rich and detailed understanding of the phenomenon that can help us better grasp the moment we are in today and keep us moving forward. We also need far more research into how social movements have engaged with media and media reform. History is a more stationary target, and with access to historical archives, the amount of evidence is considerably larger, making a more accurate appraisal possible. There are proven important lessons to be learned. In recent years, we have seen trailblazing work on the consumer movement's campaign against advertising, the struggles over telephone systems, and the organized campaigns over media in the 1940s. However, most of these movements have barely been researched, because mainstream research has tended to accept commercial media and communication as the natural and inevitable system in the United States, if not the rest of the world. So, for the enterprising scholar, this is like being the first person to fish a lake — there is so much we do not know.

If hard research on the media reform movement is not going to be the basis of scholars' critiques of the media reform movement, what is? This leads to the second concern I have with the Snorton and Berger essays: they base their critiques on the views of a select and disparate set of social theorists and scholars whose insights regarding the specifics of the media reform movement are, to put it kindly, not readily apparent (though I will say that Snorton's references to research on the African American press and the Black Power movement has some real promise). I recognize that these theorists and scholars have a good deal to say on many subjects, but I fail to see either how they fit together, or what specifically they have to offer here. At times, it seems like Snorton and Berger, if you will permit me to mix metaphors, are each throwing everything and the kitchen sink (e.g., public journalism, cultural imperialism?) up against the wall, hoping something will stick.

This kind of social theory pastiche is, of course, a tried-and-true format for some academic scholarship, but as the basis for establishing a useful critique of the current media reform movement — in both the theoretical and applied sense Snorton and Berger clearly hope to achieve — it has severe limitations.

There is a difference between an overarching worldview and a sweeping critique of the existing order on the one hand and the strategy and tactics of a social movement on the other. The sort of critique some of their favored theorists make about democracy should not be and cannot be effectively transmitted to a specific critique of the strategy and tactics of the media reform movement. One can believe that capitalism is a flawed and doomed social system and that the United States should be a socialist nation, yet still work fervently in the here-and-now for movements that are not socialist and that have the support of many who oppose socialism. One cannot necessarily infer one's tactics directly from their overall critique and vision; nor can someone assess one's tactical actions and necessarily grasp their overall perception of democracy and justice.

Immanuel Wallerstein (2008) recently illuminated this matter in a lovely tribute to Andre Gunder Frank. A fundamental problem of social critics and especially those on the left, Wallerstein argues, is the tendency to fail to recognize the importance of the long-term, medium-term and short-term. These time frames make very different demands upon our strategy and tactics and cannot be deduced from our visions. How we think through the relationship of our values and visions to these three time frames is the stuff of politics. Whether we like it or not, we all live in the short-term. For most people, it is their only conception of the world. In Wallerstein's view, in the short-term, it is imperative for progressives to support the "lesser-evil." To do anything else would demolish any credibility we have with those in the population we are most interested in working with to build a more just and humane society. As for the medium-term, Wallerstein states:

If in the short run, we are all into the business of compromises (many of them unsavory), in the middle run, we should make no unsavory compromises. We should push only for that which matters in terms of transforming the system, even if the rewards are not immediate.

And long-term thinking is necessarily vague. We have a broad vision that guides and inspires us, but "it is possible to discuss the long term only in very general terms." My approach to media reform has attempted to embrace Wallerstein's vision; it is why I have pressed for a commitment to middle-term concerns, while we also engage in titanic short-term struggles over matters like network neutrality, media ownership, Internet access, public media, and government propaganda. Unless we push for the middle-term, we will never get near the long-term vision.

In a critical juncture, the range of opportunities in the short-term can increase, which only underlines my argument for the media reform movement to have one foot in the middle-term and one foot in the present. We always have to be thinking beyond the short-term, but in critical junctures the need to do so is even greater. In times of crisis, what seems unrealistic and utopian one year could become fair game for consideration a few months later and, if we are victorious, evolve into conventional

wisdom down the road. But it will not happen unless we have strategic vision and consciously push the contours of debate for media policy reform. Again, this is the stuff of politics.

But no matter how my concerns about the media reform movement are resolved, in the next five to 10 years, if not less, fundamental communication policy decisions likely will be made that will shape our nation for decades, maybe generations. Whether we will even have something remotely close to a credible journalism is very much up for grabs, along with much else. These decisions will be made whether we like it or not, under terms over which we have only a little control. If we elect to sit this one out because we are unable to get the ideal results in the short-term, or because this movement does not score high enough on our checklist of core issues, we "ain't going to make it with anyone anyhow." We will simply be fools.

This confusion about vision, strategy, and tactics, and between the long-term, middle-term, and near-term explains one of the paradoxes of these two pieces by Snorton and Berger. Because media reformers, in the short-term, are not always striving to win the final revolution, or are not addressing every element of social justice to their satisfaction, the authors suggest media reform has lost its necessary connection to fundamental social change. I share their concern that preoccupation with the short-term can cause us to lose sight of the connection to movements for social justice. It is one of the reasons I have reduced my role in the movement, because I want to participate more directly in broader political campaigns. But I can state from direct experience it is an inaccurate and unfair reading of the movement. Snorton and Berger also make this assertion with no sense of irony. The point that I emphasize throughout my work, and I attempt to stress throughout my practice, is that the success of media reform is tied to the success of movements for social justice; they rise and fall together. Media reform cannot succeed unless there is a profound democratization and politicization of life in the United States. Likewise, such a democratization cannot occur, or at least the degree of difficulty to achieve it, will be vastly higher, without successful campaigns for media reform. I do not think it is unfair to say that this is a bedrock founding principle for Free Press and the entire media reform movement.

To be fair to Snorton and Berger, this criticism of the media reform movement for being insufficiently connected to movements for social justice has an important basis in fact. Berger perceptively emphasizes Free Press's formulation of being "nonpartisan and progressive" as the basis for what he regards as its programmatic confusion. The left-right coalition that Free Press and the media reform movement aggressively pursue undermines the movement's capacity to stand for the sort of social justice values that animate successful and useful movements. It is a very good point, and as person of the left my entire adult life, this notion of nonpartisanship was not an easy pill for me to swallow. I would be remiss not to acknowledge that it has put me in some strange beds, and led me to pull punches on issues where I desperately wanted to throw haymakers. Moreover, as Berger correctly notes, it is a difficult alliance to pull off in the real world of politics and produces all sorts of problems. One of the factors that led me to reduce my involvement with Free Press was to shed these nonpartisan handcuffs. But I still understand why Free Press and the media reform movement need to remain non-partisan, and why they are truly progressive movements. Because, in this case, I can take responsibility for being the person who developed this terminology and schemata, allow me to explain.

This notion of “nonpartisan and progressive” is a much more complex and nuanced formulation than Berger allows, and it is not clear to me that he has read my explanation of it in *Communication Revolution*. I agree that, at first glance, it appears contradictory, if not doomed. The point simply is that certain types of structural organizing — media reform, electoral reform, campaign finance reform, voting rights, access to quality education — are nonpartisan in that they do not necessarily favor a specific viewpoint, social policy, or party. These forms of organizing are so closely related, I argue, we can consider them a “democracy movement.” They can attract support across the political spectrum from all those who favor fairness, justice, and political democracy. (Some, perhaps many, principled conservatives think their ideas are best, and they can win a fair hearing among an informed and engaged citizenry as much as liberals or socialists; they do not fear democracy.) But these forms of organizing are thoroughly progressive, because if these movements succeed, they empower people without property and make the society both more democratic and egalitarian. Such a society, I argue, will be more likely to pursue progressive policies that promote social and economic justice. (For example, if everyone over 18 voted in the United States, I suspect our politics would move to the left, perhaps decisively.) And that is why these “nonpartisan” movements tend to be opposed by those atop society, those who fear and oppose democracy. They do everything in their power to undermine the nonpartisan nature of the campaigns, because they understand these campaigns are easier to defeat if they are perceived as purely movements of the left.

If one assumes that Free Press had a monopoly over media activism, or political activism more broadly, and insisted that all who wished to work with it maintain a similar position, I would be much more sympathetic to Berger’s position. But Free Press does its work in one portion of the field: it works to bring public involvement on the core government policies that affect media. In this context, being nonpartisan is imperative, both for political success and to undermine the red herring criticism that Free Press simply wants to censor right-wingers and replace them with progressives. For the most part, the policy proposals Free Press works on are viewpoint-neutral, meaning they do not favor a specific viewpoint (not that Free Press discourages viewpoints). When Free Press works with groups like the Christian Coalition or Brent Bozell’s operation, it never signs off on their politics or vice versa; it simply agrees on a specific matter. Without these coalitions, our chances for success would be much lower, and, in some cases, non-existent. In the future, the political road map may change and the need for coalitions may lessen, but I expect Free Press at least will maintain its nonpartisanship.

But Free Press is not the only game in town, and it clearly delimits its work to media policy activism to make it clear that there is plenty of important work it does not do or intend to do. The broader media activist movement includes people creating independent media, people doing media education and media criticism, and people organizing media workers and the media justice movement. It includes local groups and national groups. Free Press has always emphasized the necessity of recognizing all elements of this broader media movement and of working together. Few of these other elements claim to be nonpartisan, nor should they. Snorton and Berger are both understandably captivated by the media justice movement, and few things would make me happier than to see this movement explode into prominence. But media reform and media justice are not adversaries, at least not to most of the people I have dealt with on the ground, trying to get stuff done; they are comrades and allies. It is true that, at times, there are philosophical, strategic, and tactical differences, and, occasionally, there is competition

for scarce funds, but those tensions are trumped by the common interests that bring them together. As Free Press has been successful, it has not buried media justice; to the contrary, it has brought attention and resources to media justice organizers. Free Press is leading the policy fights to get channels and resources to assist media justice activists with the tools they need. I can understand that in the seminar room, media justice and media reform may seem like incompatible approaches, and that in the world of social theory, they may be the equivalent of King Kong vs. Godzilla. But in the political world they are, on balance, complementary. We need each other.

Berger has keen political judgment as far as I can tell, and, with no sense of irony, he ends up recommending this multi-front approach pretty much as I have just described. However, I think my route is a little more direct and has fewer cul-de-sacs along the way. But the important point I trust this discussion demonstrates is how provocative and perceptive so many of the criticisms raised in these papers are. I regret that I have only enough space to address a couple of them here; I look forward to more symposia along these lines in the future. Snorton and Berger are talented and ambitious young scholars. I thank them again for taking the initiative to propose this symposium and wish them the best with their research.

References

- Wallerstein, I. (2008). Remembering Andre Gunder Frank While Thinking About the Future. *Monthly Review* 60 (2) June): pp. 50-61.