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# When Ants Move Mountains: Uncovering a Media Theory of Human Agency

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**Abstract:** Just as Smythe argued communication was the “blindspot of western Marxism,” western communication and media theorizing itself suffers a blind spot, when it places media power in the hands of dictators and captains of industry as if no others might put pen to paper and change history. Meanwhile, theoretical explorations of how media praxis might be understood and employed for emancipation – not subjugation – emerged through the experiences of people in the Global South and Indigenous communities. This article examines and contrasts the theoretical silos, seeking moments of cross-over and synergy between static, top-down conceptualizations of Western mass media theory, and the more people-powered media praxis of colonized people seeking liberation. Building on the literature of differing experiences, the author draws a framework to encompass the full spectrum of media power. Here scholars, policy planners, and media practitioners alike may find common ground from which to recognize and support grassroots media producers as agents of meaningful social change.

**Keywords:** communication theory, media theory, media studies, cultural studies, Global South

## **Introduction: A blind spot of media theory**

Somewhere in the world, at this very moment, a press is turning not to stupefy, sell or enslave, but to liberate. We know not where until the moment the dictator’s statue topples, surprising even close observers of events. A sudden flowering of broadsheets in a Rangoon market, a rush of voices on the air in the Guatemalan highlands, an expanding universe of online journalism in Jakarta, together signal that media once viewed as nonexistent or, at most, hopelessly marginal, was stronger and more widespread than imagined. Just as Smythe

(1977) argued that communication was the “blindspot of western Marxism” (p. 267), one might argue that communication theory itself suffers a blind spot, namely a tendency to place media power in the hands of dictators, colonialists, and captains of industry, as if no others might put pen to paper and change the course of history.

It is no great revelation, however, that dominant theory misses a large portion of the picture -- nearly anyone who engages in the study of alternative media raises this lament sooner or later. At some point, though, one must dig into how and why the theoretical deficit occurs, and offer up alternative perspectives. Downing (2001) posits the blind spot exists because “the established research and theory agenda...has a predilection for the seemingly obvious and easily counted” (p. v). I agree, however I will argue there is more than lazy science at work. A critical reading of literature of the past three centuries reveals the blind spot has historical roots in the industrialized West, where communications and media studies first emerged alongside theories of mass society, *de facto* privileging mass media as the only media of account. Meanwhile, the historical experience of colonized peoples in the Global South and the Americas contained a different view. Grounded in popular movements and anti-colonial struggles, theorists and practitioners such as Ngũgĩ (1983), Espinoza (1969/trans.1979), Diallo (2008), and others revealed the possibility of social change through action. Importantly, their worldview placed human communication, rather than material production, at the centre of social life, leading to explorations of how media praxis might be constructed and employed differently, a dialogue long muted in the academy of the industrial West.

This article examines and contrasts the theoretical silos, seeking moments of cross-over and synergy between static, top-down conceptualizations of Western mass media theory, and the more people-powered media praxis of historically marginalized communities. Building on the literature of differing experiences, it builds a framework to encompass the full spectrum of media power -- one that lays common ground for scholars, policy makers and media practitioners alike to recognize and support grassroots media producers as agents of meaningful social change. Through equal parts critique of dominant literature, followed by examination of alternative literature/praxis, the intent is to encourage the application of a much wider array of perspectives to contemporary media problems. A discovery of media theory ‘from below’ moves one out of a one-dimensional world where, as Hachten (1971) has argued, “Lack of *mass* media, which implies technology, does not mean that no media have been in use” (p. 11). Without an expanded framework, myriad grassroots newsletters, community radios, online projects, and other socially impactful media projects remain obscured when theorists speak of ‘the media’ -- and, wherever theory seeps into action, this blind spot matters. It matters, for example, when progressive social movements frame ‘the media’ as a hegemonic Other, rather than terrain to be explored and liberated from the marketplace. It matters when governments, aid agencies, and international non-governmental organizations gather at the tables where media development support and regulatory frameworks are dispensed to a communication-hungry world. Without a theory of alternatives, the potential for liberating, human-centric communication policies becomes replaced by market models aimed at mass audiences. We re-create rather than create, leaving some of the world’s most vibrant and consequential media sitting on the sidelines, unacknowledged and unsupported.

### **Seen From Above, We Look Like Ants**

Writing as someone raised in, and fully enculturated by, Western industrial society, I have a sense of how narrow and engrained the Western gaze may be, even as our hubris assumes this

gaze is shared by all of the world's eyes. For example, over the course of recent history, we in the West have absorbed the idea of people as ants marching to the beat of machines, holding little agency or desire to break away from their path. Even our own histories -- the Civil Rights movement, women's liberation, flower power, Occupy -- fade under a totalizing capitalist haze. It is not surprising, then, that in academic circles and popular discourse alike, we often hear ourselves speaking of 'the media' with emphasis on the word 'the,' imaging a single, unifying industrial product that beckons and enslaves a mass audience. The roots of this image are not universal but are deeply entangled in the emergence of mass society and industrialization in Europe. To speak of 'the media' as a single global condition, like a bad case of the flu, therefore contains a dose of Eurocentric conceit.

A review of Western literature helps diagnose this conceit's origins. In Europe, media theory developed hand-in-glove with mass society theory at a time when modern humans began to extend their social ties well beyond family and village. Early modern media in the West are historically tied to the emergence of the masses, a historical development welcomed by some, feared by others. As early as the 17th Century, English elites began to take notice of the gathering 'mob' or 'crowd' as a social phenomenon. With the French Revolution, "the power of the crowd for the transformation of society was realized" (Marshall, 1997, p. 28). Cultural elites expressed alarm at penny press novels, racy newspapers, and dancehall tunes that threatened high culture, while political and social theorists grew even more alarmed at the crowd's potential to pelt gendarmes with paving stones (D. Schiller 1996; Ely, 2002). Members of the scholarly class foresaw "a permanent threat to civilization" (McClelland, 2010, p. 214). In 1848, the crowd flexed its political strength; by the 1890s, workers' strikes and May Day parades occupied European streets, occasionally resulting in police suppression and riots. From a criminological perspective, Scipio Sighele argued that the crowd's "unified soul" was "more susceptible than the individual to the baser emotions of a primitive man" (cited by Marshall, 1997, p. 34). Social psychologist Gustave Le Bon (1896) described the crowd as feminine: emotional, feeble-minded, and easily led by strong men. The crowd's ability to form organizations, establish newspapers, and elucidate political demands in well crafted statements such as the People's Charter of 1838 did little to elevate its status among propertied elites who feared those who might "fire the cornstock and the barn" (as cited by Epstein & Thompson, 1982).

In contrast, early working class radicals understood themselves as contributors and providers, "those that are willing to work" as opposed to "those who are not" (*The Poor Man's Guardian*, as cited by Epstein & Thompson, 1982). Indeed, both agrarian and urban workers of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century spent their major efforts not in wanton revolt, but in the formation of combines and co-operatives, forging rational alternatives to the negative impacts of industrialization and urbanization (Giddings, 1887; Hammond & Hammond, 1947; Fairbairn, 1991). Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels stood among 19th Century thinkers who welcomed the emergence of this new force, elevating 'the crowd' to 'the masses' and 'the proletariat,' the only social entity capable of resisting the exploitation of a rising capitalist class. Far from emotional and primitive, Marx and Engels' proletarian masses comprised the rational, organized forces that humanity needed to survive and progress in a rapidly evolving world. This was not pitchfork-waving counter-reaction; rather, the working class was deeply tied to the process of industrialization: "with the development of industry the proletariat not only increases in number; it becomes concentrated in greater masses, its strength grows, and it feels that strength more" (Marx & Engels, 1848/ 1959, p. 16).

The concept of mass society as an outgrowth of industrialization came to be shared by both followers and critics of Marx. In the telling and re-telling, the tools of power were divvied up, and radical thinkers -- perhaps deaf to the clanking of their own presses -- tended to sort media into the capitalist toolbox. In the words of Ferdinand Lassalle (1892):

The true enemy of the people, its most dangerous enemy, and even more dangerous since it appears in the guise of a friend, is today's press! Be sure to remember with burning soul this motto which I hurl at you: hatred and contempt, death and destruction to today's press! (1892, p. 14; trans.by Theobald, 2006, p. 22)

In fact, Marx himself had little to say about media, but what he did say often ran counter to later socialist/Marxist discourse on communications. Grosswiler (1998) observes, for example, that 20th Century Marxists soundly rejected Marshall McLuhan, even though Marx had earlier observed that the printing press, as a replacement for epic poems and ballads, fundamentally changed how stories were constructed and told -- a decidedly McLuhanesque notion. Williams (1975/2005), for example, critiqued McLuhan's idea that media alone, independent of the market, holds power to determine social relationships and set historical trajectories, and from this standpoint concluded that early newspapers were merely messengers of "an expanding system of trade" (p. 13). Yet Marx himself was considerably less confined by market determinism than were his later interpreters. "The press is the most general way by which individuals can communicate their intellectual being. It knows no respect for persons but only respect for intelligence," he wrote, adding that conflicts over censorship represented a struggle between authorized and unauthorized voices, not an indictment of newspapers and journals themselves (1842/trans. 1975, p. 175).

It is worth noting that Marx, himself a journalist and editor, arrived in London as a refugee of censorious press policy (McChesney, 2007; McLellan, 1973). With this in mind, it seems plausible that a Marxian view of media should simultaneously occupy a place in hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourse, as described by the early 20th Century writings of Antonio Gramsci (1916/trans. 1996). Just as Marx drew a distinction between freedom of the press and free enterprise, Gramsci drew a distinction between "the bourgeois press" and "the Socialist press," urging workers to boycott the former ("Newspapers and the Workers," para. 7). However, Gramsci's works were not translated or widely distributed until the 1970s. By this time, a generation of theorists had already firmly situated media as having no purpose or potential beyond a mode of production, subject to the iron law of profit. In the words of Bücher, a founder of the field of media research: "The modern newspaper is a capitalist enterprise, a kind of news-factory in which a great number of people ...are employed on a wage, under a single administration, at very specialized work" (cited by Splichal, 2006, p. 44).

The idea of media as an industrial product, rather than a form of communication, was advanced in North America by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1944/1986), who arrived in the United States in the 1930s as refugees from Nazism, having witnessed the worst abuses of media power (Theobald, 2006). While Marx experienced media as a place of struggle, Horkheimer and Adorno experienced totalitarianism's triumph. Hitler's use of film and art to maneuver the German populace appeared to substantiate Le Bon's theory of the easily swayed 'feminine' crowd. Little wonder, then, that Adorno and Horkheimer (1944/1986) came to view the masses as mere pawns in a cultural industry where "something is provided for all so that none may escape" (p. 123), and where even oppositional voices are ultimately "one in their enthusiastic obedience to the rhythm of the iron system" (p. 120).

Dallas Smythe's political economy framework further deepened the idea that when scholars speak of 'media,' they mean mass media aimed at controlling mass society. Under this influence, Siebert, Peterson and Schramm's (1963) *The Four Theories of the Press* equated 'the press' with "all the media of mass communication" (p. 1). This work framed media as operating under authoritarian, libertarian, 'social responsibility,' or Soviet dictums, all of it serving the U.S.-U.S.S.R dichotomy and owned by either states or capitalist profiteers. First published in 1956, *The Four Theories* became assigned reading for media students for decades to come. Thus, in the halls of the western academy, the outlook for the common

person was geographically limited and decidedly gloomy. Speaking to the Adult Education Council of Chattanooga, Tennessee in 1960, Smythe (1960/1994) explained:

Modern media man is a personable, likeable chap. And he means well. But he cannot be understood unless one recognizes that he lives and works in a corporate environment. (p. 109)

If there was any latent sense of optimism in the Western academy, it did not find easy purchase. Authors such as C. Wright Mills (1986) described media in their entirety as “a malign force” (p. 35) that served only to build markets and facilitate “psychological illiteracy” among the populace (p. 32). Far from the revolutionary potential of the masses envisioned by Marx, the academy’s prevailing view was of legions of dupes who were universally subject to, in the words of U.S. theoretician Dwight MacDonald, “the deadening and warping effect of long exposure to movies, pulp magazines and radio” (as cited in D. Schiller 1996, p. 65). In an essay titled ‘Of Happiness and Despair We Have No Measure,’ Ernest van den Haag (1968) encapsulated a dystopian media landscape, writing, “The mass media do not physically replace individual activities and contacts -- excursions, travel, parties, etc. But they impinge on all...and everywhere it isolates the bearer from his surroundings, from other people, and from himself” (p. 5). Furthermore, there was little sense that these debilitating effects could be challenged. McChesney (2007) recalls:

Even the most brilliant work of the late 1980s, say Herman and Chomsky’s *Manufacturing Consent*, allowed little hope that changing the media system of the society as a whole was a plausible goal. We were simply learning how the system worked for intellectual self-defense. We were speaking truth to power, but we had no illusions that we were in any position to contest that power. (p. 84)

Yet to ascribe such an inescapably totalitarian, industrial view to all western thought simply manufactures its own blind spot. In truth, no academy is so homogeneous, and indeed there are many counter-narratives: Gramsci’s (Gramsci, 1916/ trans. 1996) respect for grassroots intellectualism; Klapper’s (1960) media effects studies, which suggested audiences are less easily manipulated than assumed; Marcuse’s (1964) identification of individual audience identities within the masses; and Habermas’s (1979) mixing of empirical conditions with social agency. From these less iron-clad positions, alternative futures were glimpsed. Bagdikian (1971), for example, imagined cable television might one day turn the tables on the media industry by placing an affordable, user-friendly platform in the grasp of local citizens. Williams (1989) echoed the possibility of co-operative community television, and warned that mass media critique, taken to far, engenders a hopeless stasis on the Left (1979). Feminism and queer studies influenced the edges of media discourse, offering a sense that resistance is possible, and that oppressed people can construct alternative mediated cultures (Collins, 1990). Significantly, the emergence of cultural studies transformed passive audiences into active co-authors (Hall, 1972; 1993). Cultural theorists unearthed Bakhtin’s (1935/1981) ontology of dialogism from the dustbin of history, allowing for the development of a more fluid communications theory capable of responding to the uses of media technology, whether new or old, as wielded by grassroots actors. However, this theoretical work and its sense of political project experienced a rather soft landing amid the rapid ascendancy of new topics such as virtuality, cyber-reality, and hyper-reality (Baudrillard, 1993; Everett and Caldwell, 2003; Hayles, 1999), along with a heightened interest in visual images over spoken-word culture (Mirzoeff, 1998), and fascination with spectatorship and celebrity (Rogoff, 1998; Marshall, 1997). Although these texts proved valuable for understanding some aspects of western media culture, they tended to globalize the experience

of a tiny minority of the world's people who happen to be highly mobile, connected through technology, and largely disconnected from oral and traditional culture. This presents a problem for researchers traversing the majority world. For example, contemporary theory such as "late modern transnational mobility" (Tsagarousianou, 2004) was a poor fit with my research on the media work of migrants and refugees from Burma, who travelled long distances on foot, who experienced borders as formidable, life-threatening obstacles, and whose access to communications technology was restricted by law in both Burma and Thailand. Indeed, the theoretical assumption of a rootless, globalized world provides little incentive to pay attention to media tied to local ethnic and cultural identity struggles, including the rich array of media production by and among colonized and oppressed populations (Kamalipour & Mowlana, 1994). It has been further argued that the initially political, activist edge of cultural studies was blunted as the field became more mainstreamed in the academy (Mellor, 1992; During, 1993; Agger, 1992). Informed by my encounters with refugees and journalists in exile, I am drawn to Said's (1994) critique of "incoherent" post-structuralism that has little to do with the daily political and economic conditions of ordinary people around the globe (p. 168). In these scenarios, the broad field of cultural studies, while providing room for human agency, offers surprisingly limited space to economically and politically marginalized voices engaged in very real struggles for survival and social change, in some locations facing exile, imprisonment, and execution as a result of their media work.

### **Viewed From Below, Ants Can Move Mountains**

Western media theory is not entirely bereft of human agency. As previously stated, authors such as Gramsci (1916/ trans. 1996) and Williams (1983) offer glimpses into ordinary people's capacity to collectively recognize and break their chains, and to create media of their own, while later cultural theorists depict grassroots actors in a state of dialogue with power centres. Feminists such as Collins (1990) and hooks (1994) draw pictures of dissent, while Scott (1990) reveals hidden transcripts of resistance. However, these glimpses are shaded by a generalized equation of 'media power' with mass media that is exclusively hinged to a highly industrialized capitalist economic system. While this perspective offers much to our understanding of hegemonic influences, too seldom is the gaze of dominant media theory lifted beyond corporate-controlled (and largely American) mass media, to where there might be alternate models. Thus a global tapestry of ethnic, Indigenous and local media has been overlooked and understudied by major media theorists of the West. Even McChesney (2007), one of North America's most staunch advocates of progressive media reform, writes in *Communications Revolution* that he cringes at the prospect of reading student essays that "glorify some lost cause social movement or alternative media, many times in some locale like Bolivia or Central America" (p. 88). Yet in locations like Bolivia, unheralded by western scholarship, a communications revolution had been underway for several decades. To understand it, or even see it, requires listening to an entirely different set of voices from new locations. To wit, Lassalle's identification of the press as "the true enemy of the people" (1892, p. 14, trans. by Theobald, 2006, p. 22) can find no sharper contrast than the words of Moses Kotane:

Of what use is a newspaper to a people? A newspaper is a very useful weapon in the hands of a people or a class or to whoever possesses it. Without a newspaper we would never know what other people want, see, think or do; and what was happening in the

world today.... We need a paper which will tell the people the truth of what is happening and what is to be done. (as cited by Jones, 1997, p. 352)

How may we account for such disparate views? The aforementioned *Four Theories* (1963) would classify Kotane's view as libertarianism standing opposite communism. Yet Kotane wrote the above passage for the maiden issue of *Inkululeko* (Freedom), launched by the South African Communist Party in 1921 (Jones 1997; Tomaselli & Louw 1991). It is important, therefore, to look beyond the familiar dichotomies of the West for answers. To begin with, it is worth considering that Africans communicated with each other quite effectively for thousands of years before the arrival of the modern press. Societies were highly mobile, and word flowed along the 'bush telegraph' of drums and market grounds (Hachten, 1971). When the printing press arrived, it was not solely delivered by the hands of capitalists, for there was little profit in trekking bundles of papers across the continent's far-flung, challenging geography. Following the flow of the bush telegraph, some of the first and most popular newspapers were produced by Christian missions for native African readers in rural settings, some published in the local vernacular. Launched in 1873, the Presbyterian-sponsored Xhosa-language *Isigidimi* enjoyed some editorial autonomy under an African editor, and contained "a sustained, albeit muted, level of protest" against colonial rule (Switzer, 1997, pp. 25-24). Through such publications, the ground was laid to adapt the press to later Africanist and nationalist discourse, leading to a vibrant black media culture. In 1884, when the Presbyterian mission felt *Isigidimi* had gone too far, editor Tengo Jabavu resigned and started his own paper, *Imvo Zabantsundu* [*Native Opinion*], becoming one of the first editor-nationalists in a growing continental trend (Switzer, 1997). In Egypt, turn-of-the-century newspapers such as *Al-Liwa'a*, *Muayyad* and *Al-Garida* were the first voices to openly challenge colonial rule and call for democratic reform (Dabbous, 1994). Speaking of British West Africa, Hachten (1971) writes:

The press gave to nationalism its prime means of diffusion, the medium through which the idea could be disseminated. Nationalism gave to the press its principal message, its *raison d'être*, in extending circulation. But the separation of the two is not feasible because they were wedded by a common heart and a mind -- that of the editor-nationalist. (p. 144)

Some editor-nationalists, such as Nnamdi Azikiwe, founder of Ghana's *African Morning Post* (and, later, president of Nigeria), launched their publications as liberal-entrepreneurial projects (Hachten, 1971). Other papers, such as *Inkululeko*, were connected with left-wing movements and parties. Yet their pages shared the central idea that African media were fully joined to anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles.

At the same time, the anti-colonial struggle reshaped Marxism to African ends. Similar to early British Chartists, African Marxists were willing to seek alliances across class divides, linking with students, soldiers, and "progressive members of the middle class" (Ngũgĩ, 1986, p. 2). This included progressive journalists, publishers, and writers. Literary critic Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o (1983) argues the experience of imperialism influenced cultural expression more deeply than class struggle:

On the cultural level, in the colonies and neocolonies there grew two cultures in mortal conflict: foreign imperialist; national and patriotic. And so, out of different nationalities often inhabiting one geographic state, there emerged a people's literature, music dance, theatre, art in fierce struggle against foreign imperialist literature, music, dance, theatre, art imposed on colonies, semicolonies and neocolonies. Thus the major contradiction in the third world is between national identity and imperialist domination. (p. 80)

Placing media and culture within the field of change, instead of acquiescence, expanded the possibilities and expectations surrounding the expected role of media in society. In his address to the Second Congress of Black Writers and Artists, held in Rome in 1959, Sékou Touré stated:

To take part in the African revolution it is not enough to sing a revolutionary song; you must fashion the revolution with the people. And if you fashion it with the people, the songs will come by themselves, and of themselves. (as cited by Fanon, 1963, p. 206)

This activist stance seems a polar opposite to the dark and despairing world of Adorno and Horkheimer (1944/1986). Indeed the circumstances of colonized peoples afforded no other response. As well, the idea of people power was no pipe dream in the global south. While the industrialized world grew mired in the social stasis of advanced capitalism, Ghandi's non-cooperation movement led India toward independence, and Mao Zedong's army of peasants and workers marched into Beijing. The Viet Cong defeated the French at Dien Bien Phu, while in Cuba, Castro and Guevara assembled highland farmers into a successful revolutionary army. In Kenya, the Mau Mau battled British forces; the Algerian FLN battled the French (Ngũgĩ, 1983). Throughout Africa, 35 new nations emerged between 1956 and 1966 (Hachten, 1971). One could not defend the idea that liberation was impossible, when liberation seemed to be happening all around. Further, the liberation framework entertained polarities that, although fading from Western worldviews, remained an undeniable presence in people's daily lives in the South. In the words of Frantz Fanon (1963): "The colonial world is a world cut in two.... It is obvious here that the agents of the government speak the language of pure force" (p. 38). Fanon, a Martinique-born psychiatrist who practiced in Algeria, instantly recognized Algeria's anti-French resistance as his own, a struggle shared by millions around the globe. Taking direct aim at western mass society theory, he called for a new 'native intellectual' capable of leading change: "Instead of according the people's lethargy an honored place in his esteem, he turns himself into an awakener of the people; hence comes a fighting literature, a revolutionary literature, and a national literature" (Fanon, 1963, pp. 222-223). A turn toward local wisdom marked a further divergence from prevailing Western theory. Fanon urged intellectuals to "discover the substance of village assemblies, the cohesion of people's committees, and the extraordinary fruitfulness of local meetings and groupments" (p. 47). It was a worldview that looked beyond unenlightened masses to "the enlightened actions of men and women" (p. 204). In other words, the study of humanity required a return to humanity:

Today we are present at the stasis of Europe. Comrades, let us flee from this motionless movement where gradually dialectic is changing into the logic of equilibrium. Let us reconsider the question of mankind. Let us reconsider the question of cerebral reality and of the cerebral mass of all humanity, whose connections must be increased, whose channels must be diversified and whose messages must be re-humanized. (p. 314)

Such a perspective, when applied to media theory, opens space for recognizing the power of localized, particularized communications channels to promote progressive change, rather than broad-brushing ethnic, local media as necessarily retrograde, communalist, and inconsequential in comparison to national mass media. Some 20 years later, Ngũgĩ (1986) echoed the call to view local knowledge not as an island, but as part of the sea that moves history. Further, he argued communications was the central process by which this is accomplished. Although Ngũgĩ acknowledged the Marxist dictum that production is the birthplace of communication, he added: "But there is more to it; communication between human beings is also the basis and process of evolving culture" (p. 15). The movement from

a production-centric view of human relations toward a communications-centric view was a significant development in Southern media theory. “Communication is at the very heart of social experience,” wrote Washington Uranga (1985), a pastor based in Argentina (p. 72). This position has the effect of elevating cultural production, including media, above material production in terms of defining the basic construction of social relations, introducing more multi-sited avenues for contestation and change.

Like McLuhan’s ‘global village’ theory, Ngũgĩ (1983) anticipated the development of what would become an essential tenet of alternative media praxis: the idea of a pluralist, diverse, particularist approach to media production “very much like a universal garden of many-coloured flowers” (p. 24). Yet he noted that to engage in the nationalist project, he and many of his contemporaries were forced to communicate in the language of their oppressors, a contradiction that led him to write in Gikuyu or Ki-Swahili instead of English (Smith, 2005). This method was confronted by hooks (1994), who advocated reclaiming and changing the language of oppressors as a space of political resistance. Addressing Ngũgĩ’s dialectic also became a signature contribution made by Indigenous peoples to anti-colonialist discourse. Indigenous activists demonstrated that cultural and linguistic preservation could occupy an important place in anti-colonial struggles. This was made possible in part by breaking away from the strategy of forming a singular nationalist counter-identity within what were essentially colonial geographic boundaries. Calling their peoples the Fourth World, pan-Indigenous leaders understood that, while Indigenous Peoples were connected to specific territories, they traded and communicated across and between continents (Masaqueza & B’alam, 2000). The result was an activism that was simultaneously global, and “decidedly localist, respecting the autonomy and distinctiveness of disparate Indigenous groups” (Wilson & Stewart, 2008, p. 8). This local-global stance was articulated in the Zapatista movement’s email communiqués, linking Indigenous resistance in Chiapas to social movements around the world. Although *The First Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle* (1993) was addressed to “Mexican Brothers and Sisters,” its call was clearly intended for the world, its authors identifying themselves as among “the dispossessed, we are millions” (EZLN [Zapatista Army of National Liberation]. General Command, 1993).

## Another Media

It stands to reason that against this emerging theoretical background, a different media praxis should emerge. Throughout Latin America, Africa, and Asia, new movements developed around alternative media constructions and theories. In the words of Raghu Mainali of Nepal:

We are trying to produce an act of communicating. We are not manufacturing consent. We are not manufacturing the news. We are trying to develop discussion and consensus about common issues. (as cited by Deane, 2008, p. 40)

Over decades of development, certain shared principles emerged in practice. An early step was the introduction of the ‘amateur’ journalist. Following the idea that media worked best when they flowed along traditional communication lines, *Inkululeko* attempted to recreate the bush telegraph in print, calling on readers to become reporters. In a 1944 article, the editor of the day explained:

*Inkululeko* has no paid writers. Those who write for our paper are ordinary people who have no training in journalism. From towns and villages in all parts of South Africa they send news to *Inkululeko* of what is happening in their lives...What is news?...Suppose

that in some location there is no street lighting and a donga [hole] in the road. A man is walking on this road at night and falls and breaks his leg. That's news -- and we want to hear about it. (as cited by Jones, 1997, p. 352)

Similarly, the New Latin American Cinema movement of the 1960s called for 'imperfect' filmmaking. Espinosa's 1969 manifesto 'For an Imperfect Cinema' argued that films attempting to achieve the high production values of a Hollywood film were "almost always reactionary" (Espinosa, 1969/ trans. 1979). In response, he called for a new poetic, embracing film and video production in the style of "folk art" tied to human liberation:

For imperfect cinema, "lucid" people are the ones who think and feel and exist in a world which they can change. In spite of all the problems and difficulties, they are convinced that they can transform it in a revolutionary way. (Espinosa, 1969/trans. 1979, para. 32)

The concept migrated beyond cinema to other media forms, contributing to present-day theorization of the citizen journalist:

We think of Indigenous film and video in particular as 'imperfect media' whose locally based 'embedded aesthetics' and concern for making political and cultural interventions may contribute to the theorization of a politically emancipated form of citizen's media. (Salazar & Córdova, 2008, p. 55)

While African nationalists centred much of their work on newspapers, theatre, and novels, Latin American activists experimented with emerging broadcast technology. As in the case of early African print media, small-scale, low-wattage FM radio was introduced to rural areas by Christian missionaries, rather than profit-seeking corporations. On October 16, 1946, a Catholic priest's assistant named Joaquin Salcedo Guaurin launched a volunteer-run community radio station to help disseminate information among the farmers of Colombia's Tenza Valley, 80% of whom were illiterate (Ibrahim, n.d.; Gumucio Dagron, 2003). Two years later, Bolivian tin miners established *Radio Suces* in the mining town of Cananiri and *Radio Nuevos Horizontes* in the southern city of Tupiza (Buckley, 2000). Supported by union dues, tin miners' radio represented "an extension of literally centuries of struggle by workers against the exploitative oligarchy" (Huezca, 1995, p. 151). Thus radio entered a space that Adorno (2006) had declared could only be occupied by the iron voice of authority. Importantly, the adoption of radio technology allowed for the introduction of dialogue, a process more difficult to achieve in print media. Tin miners' stations were set up not as broadcasters, but as communications hubs for public meetings and discussion among the workers. It was an idea that had been briefly floated in the west by Bertolt Brecht (1932):

The radio would be the finest possible communication apparatus in public life, a vast network of pipes. That is to say, it would be if it knew how to receive as well as to transmit, how to let the listener speak as well as hear, how to bring him into a relationship instead of isolating him. (p. 1)

Brecht's suggestion was destined to be drowned out by Adorno's dictum that the technology of radio allowed only monologue, as theorized in *Current of Music* (2006). To give credit to western scholars, though, there were attempts to introduce dialogic media concepts, a difficult task in a non-receptive environment. Convinced it was too late to introduce two-way TV in the U.S., Dallas Smythe (1973/1994) tried to take the idea to China. At meetings with Chinese officials and academics in late 1971 and early 1972, he argued that technically it was "quite possible to design it as a two-way system in which each receiver would have the

capability to provide either a voice or voice-and-picture response to the broadcasting station, which might then store and rebroadcast these responses or samples of them” (p. 232). His Chinese colleagues never took up the idea, which Smythe attributed to their inability to see the capitalist tendencies of a one-way television signal. It is plausible, however, that Chinese officialdom knew very well the potential of two-way broadcast communication, including the potential for diversity and dissent on the air. In any case, Smythe returned from China with a deeper appreciation of anti-imperialist struggles. In an essay distributed to members of the UNESCO international communications research committee, he argued that Western ideological content arrives hand-in-hand with media development strategies -- a position that prompted his swift removal from the committee and a severing of his long-standing ties with UNESCO (Smythe, 1973/1994; Guback, 1994).

In Latin America, however, the field for such ideas was fertile. The model of dialogic, empowering media fit hand in glove with Freirian (1969/trans. 1993) education reforms and community-based action research units set up by scholar-activists such as Orlando Fals Borda (2008). The open structures of grassroots media attracted the participation of women, ethnic minorities, and Indigenous communities. In the words of a Mixe woman from Oaxaca:

The information we are looking for and that we broadcast on the radio has to do with our culture and the recognition of our language, but also we deal with important themes for women that men have not dealt with. For example, they will never talk about how men are beating their women and children, or at least not talk about it the way we do, with a woman’s sensibility. (as cited by Chávez, 2008, p. 103)

By 2008, there were an estimated 10,000 community radio stations in Latin America, spread from Mexico to Argentina (Gumucio Dagron, 2008). Indigenous communities in particular enlisted community radio in the quest to reclaim cultural sovereignty (Murillo, 2008).

Community radio arrived somewhat later in Africa, with the deregulation of state media in the 1980s (Karikari, 2000). No longer considered an important technology in the West, radio adapted well to local conditions of isolation and illiteracy, practical because “almost everyone has one at home and people have only to stretch out their arm to turn it on” (Bousof & Medani, 2008, p. 68). Grounded in Freire’s Cultural Action for Freedom, station managers understood “the biggest challenge we have is to change our society” (Tiemoke Kone, as cited by Perkins, 2000, p. 1). Flattened hierarchies and democratic decision-making were considered the ideal structure for this to take place:

I have been the Director of Radio Bélékan in Kati, Mali, since 2000 and I have always directed the organization with a high sense of responsibility, in other words democratically.... Decisions are taken collectively and by consensus. (Diallo, 2008, pp. 61-62)

As these and other participatory media initiatives -- such as video collectives, village media centres and vernacular newspapers -- spread through Africa and Asia, they attracted loyal audiences and state repression in equal doses. Taking a cue from pan-Indigenous movements, many grassroots media organizations today defend their existence within the discourse of international human rights. The essential argument is that communication is the foundation of human experience, and that therefore the right to communicate must be guaranteed. After decades of debate, the right to communicate has never been successfully established in official multilateral declarations; however, it continues to be consistently expressed in activist statements such as the People’s Communication Charter (n.d.):

Communication is basic to the life of all individuals and their communities. All people are entitled to participate in communication within and between societies. (People's Communication Charter, n.d.)

There has been debate, however, regarding the limitations of a rights-based emphasis under current legal frameworks. Alice Munyua and Emmanuel Njenga (2004) advised a Communication Rights in the Information Society (CRIS) campaign meeting that "communication rights campaigns as a lone concept would not be easily understood in many African countries particularly outside civil society groups unless linked to livelihood issues and civic education activities" (p. 21). Speaking of the Asian context, Siriuvasek (2004) agrees that a narrow rights-specific focus does not adequately address the broad challenge of gaining freedom to express and to dissent. With this in mind, addressing grassroots media as a communications rights project requires a broader view of human rights, one that accepts that rights can be developed and contested locally, placing everything from the re-ordering of interpersonal relations to the drafting of municipal bylaws on the same field as universalist multi-lateral statements and initiatives. A people's media framework therefore envisions rights not only through the narrow frame of a legalistic master narrative, but also encompasses a broad field of specific local and personal struggles -- between farmer and district governor, husband and wife, panhandler and police officer, for example -- as part of the struggle to communicate and relate to others in fairness, equality, and dignity. Central to this thinking is the idea that media and social movements are one and the same, deeply tied to processes of democratization and people's empowerment. This position is clarified by the Association Mondiale des Radiodiffuseurs Communautaires/World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC):

What is Community Radio? Not the media moving into community but the community moving into the media. We...are not the media but the facilitators of social movements, the voice of civil society. (AMARC, 2007, p. 22)

Conceptualizing media activity as a social movement geared toward social change has given grassroots media a central role in people's democracy movements around the globe. It also results in media activity that is less tied to a particular technological approach than to the movements themselves, resulting in a fluid use of communications tools according to available opportunities and circumstances. For example, following the 2005 military coup in Nepal, an order came down that barred the broadcasting of news on the radio, and allowed only music. Kunda Dixit (2008) of *The Nepali Times* describes how radio operators reacted:

They resisted in creative ways and not without a sense of humour. One radio station in central Nepal...started singing the news in popular folk tunes. Another community station in Dang district took its entire studio down to the sidewalk and read the news to passersby every evening at 6PM until large crowds started to gather and the news reading ritual itself became a form of protest. (Dixit, 2008, p. 24)

Nepal's community radio networks facilitated the organizing of protests and linked remote communities to national-level conversations about the future of democracy. By April 2006, hundreds of thousands of rural dwellers marched toward Kathmandu, leading to the restoration of parliament (Dixit, 2008). Following the crisis, community radio continued to play a role in the reorganization of government by providing horizontal communications channels:

Throughout this political transition community radio stations took the news from the capital to the remote rural areas, and brought feedback and reaction of the nation to Kathmandu. Several syndicated services for radio exchange were set up to facilitate this two-way conversation between the centre and the periphery. The end result was that there was maximum public participation in the political evolution through horizontal nationwide communication via the FM network. (Dixit, 2008, p. 28)

A similar scene played out in Venezuela, when the government of Hugo Chavez was threatened by a military coup in 2002. After the mainstream media refused to cover street demonstrations, grassroots media came to the fore:

Grassroots radio and television stations broadcast the initial resistance to the coup and consequently helped to mobilize tens of thousands of people who took to the streets in protest. The resistance was further amplified through the use of cell phones to distribute information and mobilize popular resistance. Two days after it had begun, thanks in part to grassroots media, the coup regime collapsed. (Uzelman, 2008, p. 26)

But nowhere was the connection to social movements and the fluidity of technological innovation more apparent than in Seattle in 1999, when the Independent Media Centre (IMC) movement introduced to the world an Open Source content management system that allowed easy uploading of text, video, audio, and photographs to the Web. Five hundred IMC reporters covered events from inside the protest, attracting more viewers than CNN (Coyer, 2005). At the same time, radio pirates roamed the streets with suitcase radio stations and climbed into trees and other high points with transmitting equipment hidden under their clothes; from these vantage points they delivered reports via low frequency FM simultaneously broadcast on the Internet (Van der Zon, 2005). Seattle also marked the coming-of-age of media as temporary autonomous zone, following the ideas of anarchist Hakim Bey. Employing moveable autonomous media in the form of pirate radios and event-specific IMCs and blogs, “activists are able to build global networks, offering an alternative vision of our world, and challenging the corporate control over media at a fraction of the cost” (Van der Zon, 2005, p. 34). This contrasted mightily with the corporate media’s early fumbblings with the Internet and social media, viewed as an external threat that could not be molded to existing business models (Quandt, 2008).

In addition to frequent reference to Hakim Bey, indy media activists point to Zapatismo as a guiding influence. A communiqué issued by IMC New York, in response to the shooting death of indy reporter Brad Will in Oaxaca, stated: “Indymedia was born from the Zapatista vision of a global network of alternative communication against neoliberalism and for humanity” (New York City Independent Media Centre, 2006). Frequent exchanges between global activists and Chiapas have clearly figured in the development of a ‘third option’ media philosophy that looks beyond the binaries introduced by traditional Western media theory. In a video communication to a Free the Media Teach-In held in New York City, Zapatista leader Subcomandante Marcos (2001) summed it up as a choice between inertia and action:

We have a choice. We can have a cynical attitude in the face of the media and say that nothing can be done about the dollar power that creates itself in images.... Or we can simply assume incredulity. We can say that any communication by the media monopolies is a total lie. We can ignore it and go about our lives. But there is a third option that is neither conformity, nor skepticism, nor distrust. It’s the option to construct a different way. (pp. 174-175)

This call for another media -- a third option -- challenges a dominant theoretical position that for centuries has been largely oblivious to the possibility of a liberating, people-powered media praxis. It calls on us to break open the inertia of critical theory and stasis of late capitalism, described by Habermas (1979) and Fanon (1963), instead of accepting our conditions as iron law.

## Conclusion

In summary, our theorizing need not be confined to the study of audiences, owners, and material production. As Fanon (1963) so simply and elegantly suggested, "Let us reconsider the question of mankind." In reconsidering this question, our eyes are opened to the presence of human agency, where before we saw only immovable systems. We see communication and cultural production rise above material production as the anchor and builder of social relations. Our easy assumptions on media power are challenged, and the singular becomes plural. From this position, our thoughts on media are transposed to a wider universe, where voices are diverse and change is possible.

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