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International Networks of Alternative Media

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Problem   A key challenge facing movements for social change is the global commercial media. A handful of Western-based transnational media corporations, working in tandem with regional companies, control most programming, emphasizing entertainment to recruit urban consumers, and circulating news primarily framed by the interests of corporate business and Western foreign policy. Public programming to encourage dialogue and debate of public issues has withered. Stark inequalities are increasing, in both poor and rich countries, between those with the full means to produce communications and those without, especially if we factor in the violence of poverty, illiteracy, and patriarchal, racial, and caste oppression.

Context   A global network of communications activists, advocates, and researchers is emerging to address these problems (Kidd, forthcoming). This network of networks operates simultaneously on at least three planes: the construction of alternative communications media, the reform of the mainstream corporate and state media, and the support of transnational communications networks for social change movements. Alternative media projects (zines, radio, video, television, and Internet sites and blogs) not only serve people seldom represented in the corporate media; they also demonstrate what democratic media might look like in their alternative content, modes of operation, and overall philosophy. Communication reformers campaign to make existing local, national, and global communications systems more accessible, representative, accountable, and participatory. Finally, media activists work in support of social change movements whose transnational communications networks also provide additional links for the movements to democratize media. Why now? This is due to at least three interrelated global trends. First, the global shift to neoliberalism presents people all over the world with a complicated but clear set of common problems. Second, the communications networks first emerged as links among social justice movements to address these common problems. Finally, the network of communications networks began to take its own shape as groups everywhere inventively adapted the glut of consumer hardware and software from the transnational corporate market.

Discussion   The transnational movement to transform communications predates the shift to global neoliberalism. During the 1970s, led by the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), a coalition of national governments of the global South, mobilized to challenge the old imperial status quo in which news, information, and entertainment media were controlled by Western governments and corporate powers. They called within the U.N. system for a New World Information and Communications Order (NWICO), for an end to the dominance of the Western colonial powers, the equitable distribution of the world's information resources, the right to communicate, and the support of alternative and community-based media in democratizing communications. Rejecting this multilateral consensus, the U.S. and U.K. governments withdrew from the commission, arguing with the commercial media industry that

any measures to limit Western media corporations or journalists represented state censorship of the free flow of information.

The United States instead shifted to neoliberalism, or the Washington agenda. It called for market rules (privatization of public resources and deregulation of government oversight of corporations) at home and abroad. The Reagan government successfully gutted antitrust and public interest rules, as well as public supported programs at home, and pushed for the implementation of similar policies in other countries through its powerful voice in the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. However, the U.S. government was still unable to win in the multilateral arena, failing to get culture (audiovisual services) onto the trade block in the General Agreement on Trades and Tariffs (GATT), the precursor to the World Trade Organization (WTO). Instead, it decided to work on the less powerful countries one or two at a time and began unilateral free trade talks with Taiwan, Canada, and Mexico.

During the 1980s, the number and sophistication of alternative media projects and networks grew around the world. These networks emerged from both the confluence of links between social movements, primarily from the countries of the South, mobilizing against the Washington agenda; and alternative media groups inventively seizing the newly available consumer production media. Primarily based in local geographic communities, media activists began to link across their own countries and across national and regional boundaries to share resources and campaign for greater access to radio, cable, satellite, and the newly emerging computer-linked systems. They also began to support one another on common issues, including massive cuts in public spending and state-run services, growth in global media conglomeration, and U.S., Japanese, and European calls for global standards in digital systems and copyright rules.

The transnational networks begun in this era include the World Association of Community Radio (AMARC) and the Association of Progressive Communicators (APC). AMARC now operates through regional organizations, program sharing through special theme-connected collaborations (against, for example, racism and discrimination against women) and global media reform coalitions. Formed to support the global network of women, labor, ecologists, indigenous peoples, and activists organizing against free trade and corporate globalization, APC continues to build on the idea of communication rights, prioritizing the capacity building of women, rural and poor people, and the media reform efforts of member groups.

During the 1990s, a new set of activists demonstrated the more tactical use of the technologies and networks in political change. In 1989, the prodemocracy activists of Tiananmen Square in Beijing, China, used fax machines to get their message out to the world. In 1994, the Zapatista National Liberation Army built on what Harry Cleaver (1998) called the emerging transnational "electronic fabric of struggle," employing old and new media and global media networks, to challenge the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). In 1997, Korean labor and social movement activists used highly sophisticated broadband media to demonstrate against the IMF and also opened Jinbonet, the first Web-based interactive people's news service. This alternative vision of communications took another leap forward

in 1999 when the first Independent Media Center (IMC) formed in Seattle to support the protests against the WTO. Drawing from the Zapatistas, the IMCistas created a global news network. Building on the existing networks opposed to corporate globalization and providing easy-to-use open-publishing software, the global IMC quickly grew to over 150 centers around the world.

Since 2001, the network of networks has begun to flex its collective muscles to reform the dominant global media system. Coalitions of activists, often in tandem with progressive government representatives, are calling for more democratic communications at the World Summit on the Information Society; against the U.S. push for the free trade of culture, with a Convention on Cultural Diversity, adopted by UNESCO in 2005 (http://www .cdc-ccd.org); and for the protection of the global knowledge commons with a development agenda and a treaty on access to knowledge and technology at the World Intellectual Property Organization.

Solution This new network of networks demonstrates that another communications is possible and already happening. Its strength is based in cooperation through social movement organizing, media reform campaigns, and the adaptation of information and communications for the greater use of all. Almost all are severely challenged by their lack of sustainable funds and technical resources, and continuing inequities between members of racialized and gendered class differences and of cultural capital. However, faced with the stark realities of neoliberal immiseration, the network continues to build, creating a complex lattice of local-local, regional (especially South-South), and transnational links that circumvent the old colonial North-South linkages and power dynamics. If there is one glaring structural vacuum, it is the lack of involvement of U.S. activists, and particularly those based in U.S..communities and social justice movements. In the next five years, one of the key challenges will be for U.S. activists to bring together efforts for media justice in the United States, recognize the leadership of the rest of the world, and assist in mobilizing against the Washington agenda at home. What can people do to help build this network? In their own area, they can help support or produce programming for their local alternative communications media. They can also find and support the existing local, national, and global campaigns to reform the mainstream corporate and state media. This is especially crucial in the United States, whose media and media policy affect so much of the world. Finally they can educate themselves about what is going on in their own communities, national and especially international, and then help link the work of the local and global justice networks.

Linked patterns Global Citizenship (6), Working-Class Consciousness (12), Strategic Capacity (34), Media Literacy (35), Alternative Media in Hostile Environments (53), Indigenous Media (55), Digital Emancipation (60), Community Networks (61), Online Community Service Engine (62), Media Diversity (66), Citizen Journalism (91), Community-Building Journalism (97), Homemade Media (110), Citizens' Tribunal (129), Tactical Media (131), Media Intervention (132), Activist Road Trip (134).