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# Towards a Political Economy of Social Movement Media

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## **Introduction**

Inside the academy over the past ten-twelve years, attention to social movement media has begun in earnest, though commentators in mainstream media usually have given them short shrift. However, events in the Arab region beginning in January last year generated a rush of speculation about social movement media among the commentocracy, but with an extreme focus on the supposed magic of cell phone cameras and digital networking media, the so-called ‘social media’. (Exactly which media are not social is something of a mystery to me, but let that pass.) In the years immediately preceding there had been significant uses of such media in upsurges in Iran, Greece and Thailand, but 2011 really put this aspect of social movements on the commentocracy’s map.

Some of the figures are certainly eye-catching. According to Britain’s Channel 4 correspondent Jonathan Miller, it is estimated that by December 2011 opposition groups in Syria had already posted over 30,000 phone-camera micro-videos on the Internet. The Facebook page *We Are All Khaled Said*, commemorating the murder of a young Egyptian Internet café user, had 1.4 million signed on to it within two weeks of his death. And the social media story has many other chapters, including the Occupy movements around the planet, the ‘clap-your-hands’ movement in Belarus against the Lukashenko regime, the simultaneous antinuclear protest in 64 Japanese cities after the Fukushima power station disaster.

Breathless gurus such as Clay Shirky in New York, and Paul Mason in Britain, were having a field day. Networks and spontaneity were supposedly king. You might think that with my interest in social movement media, I would be clapping my hands. However, our current commentocracy combines a dizzying technological determinism with a usually blithe ignorance of the Arab region.

### **‘The Arab Springs’: a swift case-example**

If you think about it, only a racist blindness about the Arab world cemented by unabashed ignorance of its current specifics, could imagine for a moment that Tunisians, Egyptians, Yemenis, Bahreinis, Libyans and Syrians were instantly strong-armed by smart phones into revolt and the readiness to face jail, torture and death. The commentocracy seemed to fantasize that electro-magnetic telecom pulses were fusing instantaneously with Arab mass emotionalism, the supposedly febrile Arabs, to spark revolution.

The commentocracy blithely bypassed previous upsurges, from Hama in Syria in 1982 to Egypt’s *Kefaya!* movement, which had paved the way for 2011’s upsurges—not to mention many smaller revolts un-chronicled in the West, or even at the time in neighboring countries, or even from one end of the same country to the other. Those insurrections’ *primary* inspirational force was not a smart phone, but the policies of the Ben Ali and Mubarak and Assad and similar regimes, and the popular memory of those repressed rebellions.

Furthermore, the roles of ‘legacy’ media in the Arab region had also been remarkably powerful over time once the TV satellite chains became available. They served up not merely critical news as in the case of *Al Jazeera*, but also, most importantly, entertainment programming, including quiz shows, soaps, reality shows, comedy. All of these over time fostered lively currents in everyday culture, currents impatient with leaden rhetoric, stupid shibboleths, conventional silences. This was especially the case among younger people, the demographic majority in the region, for whom all this was a very large breath of fresh air.

I think there is also seriously insufficient understanding among the commentocracy of the issue of youth and generation in the Arab region. A few have noted, to be fair, the currently very high proportion of people under 25 in Iran and the Arab nations. What is often conspicuously missing in their accounts is the liminal status of being 15-30—you probably tend to be not yet married with children, you aren’t looking after elderly parents, you don’t have direct responsibility for anyone else but yourself. If an upsurge emerges and you decide to risk your life in its support, no one else will suffer other than emotionally if the risk proves fatal. Your peers will honor you. And as it is, many people at that age all around the world are quite insouciant about their chance of dying suddenly.

Yes, many varieties of nano-media played their roles, over time and at the time, including blogs, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube. I would be the last to deny this. But they played them, as I have just said, in *concert* with commercial ‘legacy’ media (notably TV), in *concert* with decades of intimate experience of despotic regimes, in *concert* with deepening economic crisis, in *concert* with the emergence of a whole new stratum of educated younger people, and in *concert* with the principles of social justice enshrined in Muslim faith.

Moreover, digital nano-media were not just ricocheting around in political nirvana. They were and are subject to surveillance technology, often supplied by firms from the democratic West. Cell phones could be immobilized in protest zones in the Arab world just as they have been in Iran and in demonstrations and protests in the democratic West. Bloggers

could be and were arrested. In Morocco as in Iran, the regime generated its own blogs and Internet messages against the opposition, in Morocco defining its opponents as Jews and atheists. (My kind of people...)

Last but not least, there is growing evidence that just as in Poland's *Solidarność* movement in the 1980s and in the anti-Milošević movement in Serbia in the 1990s, so too in the Arab region significant money and training for civil society media have come from high-level U.S. and western sources. Secretary of State Clinton's "Civil Society 2.0" and "Internet Freedom" speeches of November 2009 and January 2011 represent key policy statements which in essence endorse and expand upon that established policy of endeavoring to harness Mahatma Gandhi to U.S. hegemony.

I have begun, then, with this specific illustration of what a political economy of social movement media might look like. However, there are at least two major hazard zones to be negotiated before we can even begin to hack out a path towards a coherent political economy of social movement media.

### **Clearing the ground**

One hazard zone is defining political economy: is it classical – Smith, Ricardo, Malthus? Is it Marxist – but does that mean it started with Marx and has developed since, or that it screeched to a halt when Karl hopped his twig 129 years ago, so that the crucial task today is to understand and apply pure Marx, not to develop from his intellectual foundations? Is political economy Autonomist marxism as per the currently fashionable frolics of Negri and Hardt? Does political economy engage with feminist analysis, with geographical analysis, with institutional analysis, along the lines variously advanced by Meehan, Mosco, McKercher, McChesney, McLaughlin (and a number of other folk whose last name does not happen to begin with an M)?

The other problem zone is defining social movement media. This is somewhat easier than defining 'alternative' media, the massively disparate cultural zone that Chris Atton (2001) argues to be the great forgotten of research on cultural creativity in everyday life, a submerged continent of nano-media. By narrowing our focus to the subset of social movement media alone, we can avoid having to develop a political economy of that infinitely varied mass of cultural expression. But this only helps to a degree: social movements include many variants. There is the labor movement, there were colonial independence movements, there are feminist movements, Arab and Iranian and Burmese movements against dictatorship, Indigenous peoples' movements, environmental movements, antiwar movements, human rights movements, media reform movements, fascist and anti-immigrant movements, rightwing populist movements, obscurantist and reactionary religious movements: these are all social movements and communicating is central to what they do, but their force fields, targets, organization and media practices differ hugely (Downing 2010).

Moreover, there is the question of media formats, an historical and contemporary reality (Downing 2001: Section 2) happily sidelined by the commentocracy's myopic obsession

with digital networking media. Some use only the simplest media formats such as graffiti, placards, sit-downs, popular song, street theatre. Some try to find voice in mainstream legacy media. Many today use digital networking media. Probably at this point most social movement activists in the global North engage with a blend of media formats, from poetry to radio to video to blogs to posters to Twitter. The differing suitability of these formats to differing contexts is part of the story.

And their purposes range widely too: from striving to build a movement's cohesion, to mobilize people on the fringes of a social movement, to diffuse information that major media do not render available or that they sanitize ideologically, to satirize the powerful, to summon up a protest, to communalize intellectual property, to protect meaningful internet access, to learn from tactical or strategic political errors, to develop collective thinking around solutions to social issues.

But even if you do nail your colors firmly to the mast of one or other version of political economy, what can possibly be deduced which could permit us to muster any analytical focus whatsoever from this mobile mountain of apples and oranges? So even *attempting* to move towards a political economy of social movement media is already to be heading in the wrong direction, is it not?

### **Understanding social movements' mediasphere**

On the contrary: I insist that moving in this direction makes every sense, indeed is of the highest importance.

Why? The first part of the answer to that question is extremely straightforward: the planet's ecology and economy are enmeshed in some extremely destructive dynamics, and as of now there are rather few signs that long-term structural changes are in view that could redeem the situation.

The second part is if anything worse still, namely that some of the classical approaches to providing solutions have quite evidently run out of steam. Social democrats in government mostly appear to be imprisoned by the policy mechanics in place, or even, as with Britain's New Labour until it lost office, to be galloping enthusiastically towards an ever more intrusive surveillance state. We may be glad to hear that the deeply offensive Sarkozy and the atrocious Berlusconi have been unsaddled, but the central banks are firmly entrenched, and no social democrat within sniffing distance of office will venture to propose bringing them under democratic control.

A great deal may be learned from the Soviet experience and its offspring in China, Viet Nam, Cuba and East-Central Europe through 1989, but I would argue, regretfully, far more by way of what to avoid than what to aim for. One particular lesson for us today was the Bolsheviks' bankruptcy in terms of specific, detailed plans for a transition out of Tsardom. This had disastrous consequences for generations of Russians, Ukrainians and other nationalities. Lenin's *State and Revolution* is all vision and no plans. So when the October revolution took place, there were no detailed economic strategies. All plans were generated on the

spot. And in the end, this meant that the hastily crafted War Communism policies of the 1918-1920 civil war ended up as the prototype default model of what we now know as Stalinism, which later became the model for a whole slew of other nations.

Indeed when the Russian public began to rebel, as in the 1921 Kronstadt uprising, the revolution's leaders could only look *back* to the French revolution of some 130 years previously and mutter darkly about the danger of a "Thermidorian Reaction" (alluding to the revolt against Robespierre). The future, even the present, could still only be calculated by analogy with the past. We cannot then today afford a single moment's nostalgic reverie that *they* might have something detailed to tell us *now*, that if only there were a disciplined, far-sighted Leninist party heading a mighty multi-national alliance then a constructive future would be visible.

Practicable plans for a viable and constructive global future can only come from us ourselves, from our very human meld of real potential and ongoing inadequacy, operating in continuous dialogue through the communication channels we can readily access. There is no use hoping for help from, as British historian Sheila Rowbotham once put it, "the transcendent correctness that Leninism implies."

Today we are not confronted with a hostile 14-nation alliance aiming at stamping out a socialist virus, but rather the dynamics of capital running increasingly amok. The nodal city-regions of São Paulo, Mumbai, Singapore, Hong Kong, Seoul and Shanghai are booming, throwing up ever more astonishing skyscrapers, with architectural and engineering creativity and huge finance channeled into amazing skylines – and yet the basic problem in those cities continues unsolved: breathing safely.

I will take this glaring contradiction as emblematic of our current dilemmas, namely the ongoing crisis of sustainability and spiraling Gini coefficients. Sure, we can see easily enough what is happening, we can critique it very effectively and in the most stinging rhetoric, but credible, practicable, detailed ways out of the morass and into a different global future are not in the Left's treasury at this point. Nor in any other quarter, I might add. Sure, there are How-To-Solve-All-This books gushing out every week, and maybe in a few of them there are some socially constructive proposals for action scattered about. But in most, it will be about how to get back on track to a splendidly *undefined* prosperity, end of story.

So it seems that social democracy has exhausted itself. Leninist orthodoxy and the single revolutionary party ended by militarizing the socialist vision. The other historical alternative, socialist anarchism, can be shown to have worked well in realistic ways in Catalunya before the Spanish Civil War and possibly elsewhere, but is tendentially silent today on how to construct global strategies, buried as it wishes to be in localities. So what else has the Left to offer? At this point in history I think the beginning of wisdom and thus of credible, practical steps out of the morass, is a painful honesty, the blunt recognition that at this point we are largely bankrupt. Notwithstanding the agonizing necessity of constructive social change around our planet. Not bankrupt of critique, but of credible and practical plans and strategies, strategies which are widely diffused and known.

## Cemetery or launchpad?

We do not have to *stay* bankrupt or mute, however. Today, more than ever, social movement media make channels of debate and exchange open to very large numbers of people - extending far too slowly across the Global South, but still extending. I cannot for the life of me see how better forms of economic, political and cultural organization, and paths to inter-relate them, can possibly emerge on the planet we have, other than through the ongoing development of horizontal exchange, using these media.

This process, I anticipate, will be very protracted and distinctly untidy. It is a process which certainly needs to be assisted through what we can and must learn from blind alleys of the past, entered by so many with hope, good faith and energy, as well as from some of the successes of the past. But it is above all a process in which media *we* can activate, the media of social movements, must be developed into playing pivotal roles. Historically, such media projects have always exercised - and exercise ever more today - critical influence within the many kinds of social movement that I listed earlier (environmentalist, anti-colonial, suffrage, and the others). But increasingly today they are part of a 24/7 and even global process, complicated to be sure by access and language barriers, but nonetheless opening up vastly more points of intervention into public debate and reflection than previously imaginable.

Parallel developments in global literacy and formal education, despite the enormous obstacles in their path, can only fortify this process over time.

Thus for the tasks of constructing our livable planetary future we have no other sources, godfathers, godmothers, gurus or Santas, except - in a favored term of Ireland's anti-colonial movement - *sinn féin*, ourselves alone. Not even *leprechauns*.

For some this comes as chilling. To be alone sounds exceptionally daunting. We yearn for leaders with ready-made plans and procedures. It would be nice.

Yet the array of social and political movements that I listed at the beginning has invincible historical evidence on its side that constructive change generated from society's womb is entirely possible. If someone came up to you today and proposed that women should not have the right to vote, you would assume they were trying to make some kind of feeble joke. Yet it was a very different story for those who gathered in 1848 in Seneca Falls, New York, at the first women's suffrage meeting in the U.S. The movement for the right just to provide information on birth control to the U.S. public took 22 years, from 1916 to 1938. It is almost 50 years since Rachel Carson published *The Silent Spring*, yet now there is a global environmentalist movement with a louder and louder voice. Thirty years ago in western Germany, still divided by the Cold War Wall and with eastern Germans unable to speak against nuclear power in public, the antinuclear movement patiently churned out its books, pamphlets, magazines, songs, graffiti, pirate radio, videos - and now the government of a reunited Germany has determined to put an end to nuclear power. Movements for colonial freedom, the transnational anti-apartheid movement, the *samizdaty* against the Soviet dictatorship - so

many social movements have faced seemingly hopeless odds over many decades but have still ultimately prevailed. Our image of social movements is often of their dramatic activity peaks – Tahrir Square, Seattle 1999 – but the crucial feature of some of the most historically significant movements is *their considerable longevity, spanning decades and even centuries*. Slavery, after all, has still not vanished from the planet.

Therefore to grasp the political economy of the means of horizontal dialogue, knowledge—sharing and knowledge development—social movement media—is arguably one of the most crucial tasks facing Communication researchers. Political economy is often thought of as the dissection of ruling class power, but that exercise alone can sometimes intimidate. Indeed some who have written in the general political economy or radical sociology tradition—I am thinking of Max Horkheimer, C. Wright Mills, Ralph Miliband, Louis Althusser, Paul Sweezy—have written in a way that suggests the power structure has no cracks in it, that it is monolithic, a steamroller. There is even such a thing—you must have met it—as political masochism. Some people take perverse pleasure in rehearsing the technologies of state repression, whether in massive weaponry or surveillance or torture, probably horrifying themselves and their listeners to the point of political quiescence.

I am not speaking about quiescence here! To paraphrase slightly one of Marx’s most famous aphorisms, engraved on his tomb in London’s Highgate Cemetery, and referred to several times in this 2012 UDC meeting: “The point of political economy, however, is to change the world.” We need to take as our task not only how to dissect the dynamics of global capital and the state, but equally to understand social movement media projects as potential agents of a democratically generated critical political economy and critical cultural analysis, and of realistic plans and steps toward a world fit for all humans.

### **A distinctive task for political economy**

To engage in this task is, obviously a very different task from grasping the political economy of the intellectual property giants such as Apple, Google, Disney, Sony, Bertelsmann, China Mobile, Telefónica, their relation to the global economy, to nation-states and to supra-national regulatory agencies.

It is equally a very different task from grasping the political economy of neo-fascist, extreme-right populist movement media, which routinely turn out to have almost inexhaustible backing from exceptionally wealthy sources, or as we might put it in the USA, from “major donors” such as the Koch and the Scaife foundations. You may recall John Heartfield’s famous montage of Hitler making his distinctive salute, his right palm facing backwards and upwards, with a large industrialist behind him placing high-denomination Deutschmark bills in it, and the Nazi propaganda message underneath Hitler’s torso: “Millions are behind me.” Not that the ‘political economy’ of the ultra-right can be reduced to greenbacks—Deutschmarks or dollars alone do not generate or maintain ideological hegemony (however hard the Koch brothers may try).

You might have wondered why in my list earlier I troubled to include social movements



of this ilk and their media projects. It was firstly to help establish the critical importance of social movements as such in our world, including desperately dangerous and repressive ones. Secondly I wanted to underscore why we must pinpoint *which* social movement media projects are to be in focus if we are to construct a political economy analysis.

Those of you familiar with social movement media may by now, if you have not already, be thinking that the problem with a political economy of such media is that all too often they *have* no economy or finance worth speaking of at all—but sometimes all too much—rather petty politics! Jo Freeman’s splendid essay of 40 years back, “The tyranny of structurelessness,” comes to mind. So yes, it’s all too true, on occasion. The class, gender and ‘race’ politics in such media projects can be distinctly hegemonic in character and the gift economy turns out to have poisoned chalices! So no, we cannot delude ourselves that inside social movement media—any more than on university campuses!—we have, by a single act of the will, cleanly abolished the influence of our history, our culture, our upbringing. The more we deny this to ourselves, the more likely our butts will get bitten by what we deny.

So no, social movement media are not nirvana, not a magical public sphere. But they are what we have, and must use. Nonetheless, the venture needs handling carefully, and that means beginning from the recognition that (1) there is no one-size-fits-all political economy, and (2) while social movements may frequently wield extraordinary influence over time, they also need explaining by reference to often sharply distinct force fields, and (3) the media formats which social movements deploy and how they deploy them will usually carry great weight in determining their trajectories and outcomes.

### **Political economy of social movement media: 10 questions**

I see the political economy of these media as being rather like the multiple roads that feed into L’Étoile, the great traffic circle of the Place Charles de Gaulle around the Arc de Triomphe, but they consist in this case not of twelve roads but ten questions:

1. What is the glocal political and economic conjuncture generating the social movement in question? This is indeed four, or even five, questions in one: global, local, political, economic and their admixture. None can be passed over. For example, is the movement operating during a moment of significant hegemonic disintegration, a crucial breach? During the latter 1960s, the successes of Vietnamese forces in combating the U.S. military presence, the growth of dissent at the top of the US administration concerning the war, and the impact of the military draft on white college students, created a major breach in the previous anticommunist elite and public consensus. The process was more complex than this (see Point 5 below), but the example serves to illustrate the basic point being made.
2. What are the movement’s objective(s) and scale? Are the goals related to labor conditions, human rights, other fields? Do they overlap, as in 1999’s 4-day anti-WTO protests in Seattle? The question of scale is critical too: while some social movements are global

and persist for decades upon decades (feminism, anti-apartheid), we must avoid like the plague dismissing short-term movements involving small numbers in a particular neighborhood. The work of Clemencia Rodríguez (2001; 2011) is exemplary in this regard.

3. What is the movement's time-span and cyclical phase? In other words, at which juncture in the course of a given movement's emergence, development, decline or seeming dormancy are its media in operation? Such movements, self-evidently, do not maintain the same level or type of activism continuously. Italy's social movements of the 1970s had a phrase for this, *cicli di lotta*, meaning cycles of struggle, directed not simply to a given social movement but rather to denote the waxing and waning of vigorous periods of social movement activism in general. Influential social movement analyst Sidney Tarrow, who began his career researching those Italian movements, has rephrased it in English as 'cycles of protest', but with the same target in view (Tarrow 2011).

However, while dormancy is conventionally interpreted both by the commentocracy and by many social movement activists themselves as collapse and failure, this is a grave misperception. It may to the contrary serve, and quite often does, as a crucial germinal 'winter' for reflection, critique, regrouping and redefinition. In which, precisely, the movement's media have pivotal roles to play.

4. What is the shifting weight of different wings and factions within the movement? Social movements are not monolithic, and their media may assist this variety to express itself constructively, or to degenerate into destructive factionalism, shifting from wings to splinters.
5. What are the strength and flexibility of communication flows between base and leadership? In Todd Gitlin's landmark study of the SDS within the U.S. antiwar movement over 1962-1969 and its coverage by mainstream media (Gitlin 2003), he argues that the sudden eruption of journalistic attention to the antiwar movement's arguments and positions after years in the news wilderness, meant the leadership at last had an unprecedented and overwhelming opportunity to communicate with the mass of the U.S. public. However, the time and energy entailed in doing so left far less time for internal work and thus abruptly stifled SDS's distinctive strength, namely the continuous democratic flow of communication between and among the leadership and local chapters. Insofar as Gitlin's analysis is correct, the internal functioning of movement media is clearly a critical dimension.
6. Which media formats are accessible to which movement media activists? Especially though not uniquely in the global South, issues of literacy, both conventional and digital, and of the high costs of Internet access, let alone computer ownership, are all pivotal matters. Radio and straightforward cell phones (at least in urban areas at the time of writing) are a different matter. But this question also has an aesthetic dimension—are there good writers or artists or singers whose media talents are available to the dispossessed?
7. What is the quality of archived and accumulated democratic media practice experi-

ence? All too often, with the decline of social movement activism, the lessons which could have been learned from generating media projects are not learned because no one had the time—at the time!—to stop and do so. Afterwards, activists may suffer both burnout and an acute sense of failure, which lead them to think nothing can be learned from what they did. This is a major shame, as it leads to the movement media ‘wheel’ constantly being reinvented from scratch. This failure operates both on organizational and aesthetic planes.

8. What is the efficiency of the State’s surveillance and enforcement over movement communications? The following rapid examples indicate the important of this dimension.

In 2011, the Tunisian regime was much better equipped for surveillance of digital networking media than Egypt’s. Iran’s blogosphere contains numerous regime voices posing as ordinary citizens, as well as many acknowledged *Pasdaran* sources. Some regimes reluctantly permit popular singers a degree of license beyond ordinary citizens’ right to self-expression because they fear making themselves even more unpopular, including in elite circles, by banning them outright. Targeted assassinations of journalists are routine in certain countries. Cell phones were seized by Libyan police to check messages or photos sent. The Indonesian regime, however, was very late initially in developing digital technology expertise in its law enforcement agencies, which gave movement activists there a number of years’ head start. The PRC has made internet café owners the prime responsible agents for policing any infractions on their premises.

Reference above is made to specific states’ surveillance of their own publics, but in the social movement world and in the world of aerial drones we need to be equally alert to the U.S. state’s global surveillance via its National Security Agency in Fort Meade, Maryland.

9. What degree of normal credibility do mainstream entertainment and news media enjoy? How porous are they for alternative political visions? Linda Jean Kenix has illuminatingly addressed the interface issue between corporate and alternative media in general as an emergent phenomenon (Kenix 2011), but this particular issue goes to the heart of perceptions of the need for other public voices.

One Italian writer during the heyday of Italy’s free radio movement (1976-82) commented how accustomed Italians were to hearing broadcast news which simply represented, in wooden language, the Christian Democratic Party’s view (in office for 30 years at that point, and dominated by very conservative and corrupt national politicians). The new tiny unofficial radio stations were oases in the broadcasting wilderness. But in countries such as Britain, with more porous media such as the national broadcast channels, *The Guardian*, the *Financial Times*, the crying need is not felt so acutely for a range of voices outside the woodenly rightwing echo chamber.

10. Finally, what are the relationships between social movement media uses of digital networking media and uses of legacy media technologies? This is distinct from the previous question, which purely addresses the political spectrum of legacy media. For Manuel Castells (2012), in this as in his other works, legacy media technology uses are confined to the sidelines, indeed barely to there, and ‘networks’ are king. Their interface scenario is continuing to take shape up to the time of writing, but arguably Castells’ unilinear emphasis is no more helpful than the continuing plethora of legacy media content analyses which blithely bypass digital networking media dimensions.

### A last word

In conclusion, the possibilities are enormous via all kinds of citizens’ media, for “the movement of movements” around the planet to develop *practical* plans for developing constructive worlds (plural), instead of our deeply distorted current world order. Doing imaginative and well-crafted research on the political economy of social movement media is an opportunity to provide information which can be deployed to build debates and knowledges towards such worlds. Not only to critique the present one, valid as that exercise is.

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