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Recommended Citation

Raphael, C. (2000). Rethinking media and movements. *Radical History Review*, 78, 130-137.
<http://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-2000-78-130>

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Author post-print manuscript

Rethinking Media and Movements

Chad Raphael

Todd Gitlin's work helped us to understand the tremendous barriers to left movements speaking freely through commercial media, and the potentially destructive impacts of media imperatives on movements. Edward Morgan adds another warning: today's organizers must overcome a media history of the sixties that demonizes or trivializes the era's struggles for justice. But must we also overcome some of our own thinking about how movements create change, and their relationship to the media? Certainly, coverage of anti-Vietnam War organizing is one case study worth revisiting to recover an accurate past that can inform contemporary mobilizations. But there is also a danger that in drawing generalized conclusions from the New Left's experience (for, as I will argue, it is really the New Left, not the broader anti-war movement, to which Morgan and Gitlin's conclusions apply), we can sink into a debilitating pessimism about organizers' ability to speak successfully through mainstream media, or, just as important, to speak unsuccessfully and still affect policy and public opinion.

My aim is not to put a happy spin on news about the movement, but to suggest that telling this tale too darkly may blind us to openings that exist or could be created in the media. I see Morgan trying to get beyond the pessimistic determinism of some earlier work in the field, but still struggling with three key questions for all of us who try to make sense of the relationship between for-profit media and left movements. First, how open is the hegemonic process to

contestation in the media, and what kind of opposition would count as substantive? Second, what constitutes successful organizing and genuine social change? Finally, have today's movements learned from the New Left's interaction with the media in ways that make them less likely to repeat the past?

These questions must be asked if we are to build historical accounts and contemporary models that fully explore ways of effecting change *through* the mass media, not just *despite* them. Studies such as Gitlin's made invaluable contributions to showing how mainstream journalism violates democratic norms by delegitimizing citizen protest. Today, our task is to figure out how to overcome this. Failing to do so may cut off a crucial area of strategy for organizing. Morgan rightly draws our attention to the importance of interpersonal channels of communication and the internet for transforming consciousness, encouraging substantive participation, and holding movement leadership accountable. However, these channels alone cannot sustain today's movements, especially if they hope to influence policy internationally. Social movements *must* use the mass media, and not simply to communicate their goals. Organizers also need the media to mobilize support from citizens, to demonstrate the movement's power and win recognition from its adversaries and government, and to broaden the scope of conflicts in hopes of drawing in potential partners or mediators.¹

Open and Closed Versions of Hegemony

Gramsci's explanation for the relative stability of capitalist democracies in the face of economic crises and insurrection gained a special relevance for left scholars as they attempted to make sense of the fate of sixties era organizing. In the years since, much work has explicitly or implicitly relied on the notion of hegemony – the process by which dominant classes or class

fractions maintain their control over the economy and state, and secure the consent or acquiescence of the ruled, through ideological means rather than coercive force. Yet theorizing about the media's role in hegemony has yielded a broad continuum of positions, stretching from more open versions of domination to more closed ones. At the extreme open end, some cultural studies work (but by no means all) sets up a rather simple and highly unified "dominant ideology," then finds substantive acts of opposition to it in almost every resistant reading of a media text, or every micro-practice that implies subcultural difference. At the closed end, some political economy sees a similarly unitary dominant ideology, but admits of no opportunities for social movements, journalists, or audiences to disrupt the smooth flow of hegemonic propaganda from corporate owners, advertisers, and the capitalist state.

Morgan draws both on more closed visions of news' role in the hegemonic process, such as Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model, and more open ones, reflected in some of Kellner's writing. He generally treats Vietnam coverage through the closed model, and coverage of the Seattle protests through the open one. But he collapses important differences between the two stances when he claims that "the two models make essentially the same argument" (note 10). Despite occasional disclaimers, Herman and Chomsky tend to express a more instrumental view of the media as a tool of the state and capital. It is one thing to observe that the parameters of debate about the Vietnam War in the media closely hewed to the range of views held by political elites, and excluded the anti-war movement. It is quite another to reduce to a unified propaganda system the many reasons why news organizations depend primarily on elite government sources (including journalists' need for sources presumed to be legitimate, knowledgeable, available, and accountable to citizens),² and the different goals of elites who speak to journalists (selling policy to the public, appealing for support from other political elites, undermining rivals' policies or

careers). The term “propaganda” implies a conscious and concerted intent among political-economic elites and journalists to spread common messages and manipulate the public mind, which fails to account for contentiousness over Vietnam War policy in Congress, the Executive Branch and the news.

The propaganda model’s shortcomings emerge most clearly if we look at the later years of the war. Daniel Hallin’s careful and critical content analysis of network news war coverage, which Morgan does not draw on, similarly finds that the range of policy debate in the news was bounded by the views of U.S. officials. Yet, by 1969, when the Nixon administration declared its “Vietnamization” policy to achieve “peace with honor,” Hallin explains that there was “exactly the kind of environment in which a president is likely to have trouble managing the news, and, presumably, public opinion. The administration, like its predecessors, but much more blatantly, was sending out contradictory signals about its policy. Political elites were openly divided about the war. Relations between the president and Congress proceeded toward ever greater levels of tension. The antiwar movement was making major inroads into the political mainstream.”³ Although journalistic discussion remained within the limits of official policy views, “with officials divided and communication channels within the administration inoperative, the media became a forum for airing political differences rather than a tool of policy.”⁴

Closed versions of hegemony also tend to be implicitly functionalist.⁵ The scholar begins with an assumption that the news fits the reified “demands” or “needs” of a larger system or ideology. Morgan strays in this direction when he writes that “it is inconceivable that the ideological premises of the larger hegemonic order were ever seriously challenged in a manner presented as legitimate by the mainstream media.” From this standpoint, resistance,

transformation and contradictions can be ignored or portrayed as easily recouped by hegemony. Consider Gitlin's oft-cited explanation for why the media and state sometimes appear independent from capital. In liberal capitalist societies, he writes, "the relative autonomy of the different sectors legitimates the system as a whole."⁶ If we are unable to ask at what point that relative autonomy becomes dysfunctional for hegemony, we not only rely on a non-falsifiable theory, we construct a dead-end for anyone who would critique militarism or the market through the news. Hegemony always wins. Even if the media generally treated anti-war protestors negatively, did they serve America's self-image as a tribune of democracy when Dan Rather was shown getting punched in the stomach by security guards on the floor of the 1968 Democratic Convention, and Walter Cronkite denounced them as "thugs"? When the media related war atrocities, such as Seymour Hersh's reporting on My Lai? When audiences saw the indelible images of student anti-war demonstrators shot dead at Kent State, a napalmed girl fleeing naked from a U.S. attack, and the swift execution of a prisoner of war point-blank on a Saigon street? Certainly these images were unrepresentative of all war coverage. But no matter how much journalists limited their criticisms to presenting the war as a tactical error, or as overly costly to Americans rather than Vietnamese, today these pictures do not fit snugly into a recuperative public history that Morgan describes as a "pastiche of images and texts which have proven highly useful to political elites intent on furthering the interests of global capital or the political Right."

Morgan briefly mentions that the hegemonic media are vulnerable to opposition from independent journalism, but would seem to attribute these images' critical power to "viewers' subjective responses to the imagery they encounter in the mainstream culture." But why did these images get into the commercial news media at all, and why were they shown repeatedly?

Kellner suggests that there are real contradictions that arise between the media's interests in maximizing their own profits, serving the interests of the corporate sector as a whole, legitimating hegemonic ideas, honoring professional codes of objectivity, and maintaining credibility with audiences by appearing to chronicle events of public significance and represent the full diversity of viewpoints on them.⁷ The fact that the media so often serve the first three interests better than the last three does not mean that they can forget the latter ones entirely. When organizers get good media coverage, they do so in part by appealing to expectations that the media will cover important issues fairly and represent citizens' views, not simply to the journalistic lust for conflict and color.

Models of Change

Morgan and Gitlin note that Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) overestimated the chances of sudden, structural change in the late sixties, in part because of the images of revolt that they saw portrayed in dramatic media coverage. Have we ourselves overcome the notion that the only substantive change is revolutionary, and that all else is mere compromise and reform that only end up strengthening "the system"? Do we still draw on a revolutionary model of change as the standard by which the success of movements, and the identity of players within them, is judged? This view tends to dichotomize potentially dialectical relationships between revolutionary and reformist movements, radicals and pragmatists, resistant and dominant ideologies, transforming the political-economic structure and trying to change a policy.⁸ From this perspective, radicals are marginalized in the media, reformists are coopted, and there is little ground in between.

Gitlin, for example, concludes his pathbreaking work on the New Left by arguing that “an opposition movement is caught in a fundamental, an inescapable dilemma” between violating the rules of mainstream politics and discourse, thus being excluded or demonized or trivialized in the news, and observing the conventions of the status quo, and thus being assimilated to it. “This is the condition of movements in all the institutions of liberal capitalism,” he continues. By marginalizing or taming dissent, “the media reinforce one of the central rhythms of American political history. Opposition movements emerge but their radical identities weaken.”⁹ Morgan assumes a similar framework involving a clean split between reformers and radicals in the anti-war movement. For him, if the media offered some space to critique the war, “these critiques either operated within, and therefore reinforced, the prevailing ideology (the moderates) or they became easy targets of escape and scapegoating (the militants).”

But the interaction between the militant and moderate wings of the movement, and the media’s coverage of each, was more complex. To see this, we need to differentiate more than Morgan does between coverage prior to 1968 and afterward. Hallin found similarly that through 1967 the media framed the movement as offering aid and comfort to the enemy, and as a threat to law and order at home. But, in early 1968, after the Tet Offensive and Senator Eugene McCarthy’s anti-war Presidential campaign ran strongly in New Hampshire, the media began to distinguish a “good,” anti-war movement. The networks portrayed the moderate Moratorium protests of October 15, 1969 quite differently than previous marches. Walter Cronkite told viewers that “never before had so many demonstrated their hope for peace . . . With scattered exceptions the Moratorium was a ‘dignified, responsible protest,’ in its sponsor’s words, that ‘appealed to the conscience of the American people.’”¹⁰ Hallin explains that the media framed

the moderate anti-war movement as within the realm of legitimate controversy because the moderates drew elements of the political establishment and generally “nonpolitical” citizens into the ranks of those who opposed the war. The moderates did not succeed much at getting their framing of the war into the media, but won more standing as legitimate sources and more sympathetic treatment of their efforts. Even after 1967, official voices still dominated in the news, and negative statements about the movement outweighed positive ones by about two to one by Hallin’s count, but protest was no longer automatically stigmatized as traitorous.¹¹

Morgan tends to belittle opposition to the war emanating from outside the New Left as failing to critique U.S. aggression, characterizing the moderate marchers as holding “a perspective that at times became hard to distinguish from administration rhetoric.” Why, then, were they marching on Washington?

A view of social change as an all or nothing process threatens to make movements seem futile at times when revolution is unattainable (which is most of the time), and cuts off radical actors from strategically choosing allies among “moderates.” As William Gamson notes, “it is a major achievement of some movements that they succeed in moving issues from the uncontested to the contested realm.”¹² And the radical wing of that movement accomplishes something when it helps legitimate a moderate wing, even if it fails to get the credit in the media, government or public opinion. Yes, the events of 1968 appeared to turn the public against both the war and the anti-war movement (at least its radical wing, which I suspect supplied the image that poll respondents had in mind when asked about whether they approved of the protests.) But a Pyrrhic victory is different from a total loss. Morgan mentions briefly that the movement helped end the American onslaught before it destroyed Indochina completely. Widespread coverage of the New Left’s demonstrations, however negative, and of the state-sponsored violence that confronted

protestors, raised the war's price in domestic conflict to those who would have pursued it even more aggressively. Within the movement, even if the mainstream "doves" in government and the Moratorium based their opposition to the war on its costs to the U.S. rather than on its impact on Vietnam, New Left protests helped raise those costs. In addition, movements can lose the short-term struggle over framing events and enjoy more success in the long-term. Morgan notes that public opinion eventually came around to idea that war was immoral, and that the "Vietnam syndrome" has put some constraints on American militarism, although clearly not enough. If SDS dissolved, it provided a training ground for many organizers who went on to lead and participate in subsequent movements. Is it accurate, then, to think of hegemony as having been "restored" in the same form it took before the war? Or has it instead been transformed, and how?

These observations raise the question of how change occurs dialectically, a question that is undertheorized by those of us who rely on the notion of hegemony. Consider the frequently demonstrated finding that the range of views in the news is indexed to elite perspectives.¹³ The black box for many of these studies is elite opinion, how it changes, and how movements might play a role in influencing it. Typically, the views of elites are either taken as a given, or, if they are acknowledged as shifting, this is attributed to the force of events and crises, such as "the acute and persistent brutality of the war," which Morgan mentions at the outset. But events do not explain themselves, and crises are at least in part social constructions. If elite opinion divided significantly over the war after 1968, did potential for greater civil strife and political losses have something to do with this shift? What role did the radical protestors exactly play in shifting elite opinion, by raising the political price of war on the home front, or even partially transferring their framing of the conflict to some journalists and political leaders? After all, when the state

responds to protestors with force – as it did at Kent State, Chicago and elsewhere – we are no longer in the presence of successful hegemony. By definition, hegemony refers to the manufacture of consent through ideational means, not coercion.

Reflexivity of Social Movements

In her study of how the feminist movement approached the media in the 1970s, Bernadette Barker-Plummer shows how a closed version of hegemony may blind us to “the reflexivity or strategic agency on the part of social movement actors themselves to learn about and strategically use dominant systems and discourses – in this case journalistic routines and practices – as resources in themselves.”¹⁴ Charlotte Ryan offers examples of how labor organizers and opponents of U.S. intervention in Central America have won better coverage by framing their views to resonate with consensus values, without diluting their positions on the issues.¹⁵ Today there are more resources available to left organizers for analyzing media coverage (such as the publications of Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting), and obtaining media training (such as the Strategic Progressive Information Network in San Francisco, and the Media Research and Action Project at Boston College.) Both the analysis and the training incorporate caveats from the New Left’s experience with the media, drawn from scholars and activists.

Certainly, we need more reflexive learning about what is often the hardest area of coverage for social movements to influence: foreign policy. In a world of multiplying jurisdictions – local, national, regional and global – organizers must seek the most hospitable venues for intervening in government and the media, and frame their messages for highly diverse constituents. In the late seventies and eighties, the U.S. environmental and anti-nuclear movements made some headway at the state and local levels after the federal government took a

right turn. Global movements must strategize in similar ways about what channels of government and communication offer the best chances at any given moment. For example, campaigners against genetically modified crops have put agribusiness on the defensive by framing the issue in the media in different ways to multiple constituencies. In the affluent U.S. and Europe, they have emphasized threats to consumers' health and right to know about the contents of their food; in the developing world, they have pointed to Western multinationals' interest in rubbing out small farmers and traditional cultures by locking up intellectual property rights to the stuff of life.¹⁶ They have eschewed ideological purity, making both "moderate" appeals to consumers' interest in protecting themselves against "Frankenfoods," and offering "radical" analyses of corporate power over the food system. That strategy is likely to be all the more necessary when movements seek participation from diverse international interests, and must speak through a wide array of mass media, from the local to the global levels.

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NOTES

- ¹ William A. Gamson and Gadi Wolfsfeld, "Movements and Media as Interacting Systems," *Annals of the American Academy of Political & Social Science* 528 (July, 1993), pp. 114-126.
- ² Leon V. Sigal, *Reporters and Officials* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath & Co., 1973).
- ³ Daniel C. Hallin, *The "Uncensored" War: The Media and Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 182.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 187.
- ⁵ Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 156.
- ⁶ Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 255.
- ⁷ Douglas Kellner, *Television and the Crisis of Democracy* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990), p. 118.
- ⁸ Charlotte Ryan, *Prime Time Activism: Media Strategies for Grassroots Organizing* (Boston: South End Press, 1991), p. 21.
- ⁹ Gitlin, *The Whole World is Watching*, p. 291.
- ¹⁰ Hallin, *The "Uncensored" War*, p. 198.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 201.
- ¹² Gamson and Wolfsfeld, "Movements and Media," p. 118.
- ¹³ The term "indexing" is drawn from W. Lance Bennett, "Towards a Theory of Press-State Relations," *Journal of Communication* 40 (Spring, 1990), pp. 103-125.
- ¹⁴ Bernadette Barker-Plummer, "News as a Political Resource: Media Strategies and Political Identity in the U.S. Women's Movement," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 12 (1995), p. 309.
- ¹⁵ Ryan, *Prime Time Activism*.
- ¹⁶ Peter Montague, "Biotech: The Pendulum Swings Back," *Rachel's Environment & Health Weekly* 649 (May 6, 1999).