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Mediation and Resistance

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In this chapter, I will attempt to bridge social movement theory and mediation theory, thereby answering to Downing's (2008) call to connect the field of political science with that of media and communication studies. As it becomes apparent that we are more and more immersed in an ultra-saturated media and communication environment or as some say ecology, media and communication practices of activists and (self-)representations of resistance are have come to the foreground.

However, it is argued here that attempts to make sense of media and communication for activism and resistance have hitherto been too unevenly focused on either mainstream media representations or the use of ICTs and the role of cyberspace for activists. This goes against evidence from fieldwork where activists use mainstream, movement, online and offline media inter-changeably for a variety of purposes (McCurdy, 2010). This exposes a need to theoretically encompass the various ways in which media and communication is of relevance for activists and for resistance practices, expressing this multi-media mode and age.

Mediation as more than representation

Mediation as a theoretical construct, not to be confused with mediatization (see Krotz, 2008), attempts to conceptually grasp as well as complicate the interactions between various analytical dichotomies, such as the public and the private, the producer of content and the user/audience and crucially between structure and agency (see Martín-Barbero, 1993; Thompson, 1995; Silverstone, 2002). Thumim (2009: 619) summarizes mediation as follows:

> The conceptual space delineated by the notion of mediation process encapsulates both the detail of specific instances of production, text and reception, and the broader contexts of media use…

Places of mediation refer in essence to both the sites of production and sites of reception, in essence theorizing the connection and interaction between both (Couldry, 2004: 119).

While the process of mediation is inherently dialectical – negotiating potential opportunities and structural constraints, production and appropriation, it is also asymmetrical and uneven – some are more equal than others (Silverstone, 2002: 762). Unsurprisingly then at the centre of mediation is power, mainly conceived as symbolic power (Thompson, 1995: 17). This not only refers to the power of representation and the technical skills to be able to produce and transmit information, but likewise to skills enabling individuals to critically assess information, select and make sense of information. Furthermore, symbolic power, Thompson (1995: 134-148) argues, is precisely about the 'management of visibility' and a 'struggle for recognition', which ties in with a presence and voice in the mainstream audio-visual media as well as

being visible as a movement through independent channels of communication.

The process of mediation therefore involves and includes modes of self-mediation. Mediated power should, however, not simply be reduced to discursive power alone as it also has salience with regard to mobilization, organization, recruitment, and direct action. Here the double articulation of mediation, as put forward by Silverstone (1994), is useful. Processes of mediation apply just as much to media as a material object with reference to technology and the everyday as it does to the symbolic, the discursive, with reference to Gramsci's ideological war of position (Livingstone, 2007). This double articulation of mediation enables us to consider media and the production of content in conjunction with technology as well as communication strategies and media practices of citizens and activists.

From this brief introduction into the concept of mediation it becomes apparent that mediation enables us to link up various ways in which media and communication are relevant to resistance and to activism; the framing practices by mainstream media and political elites, the self-representations by activists, the use, appropriation and adaptation of ICTs by activists and citizens to mobilize for and organize direct actions, as well as media and communication practices that constitute mediated resistance in its own right. It captures the shaping of representations in the interaction between production, text and reception and also goes beyond the text by including the role of technologies and the user.

Opportunity Structures for Resistance

In the social movement literature the concept of 'political opportunity structure' is a very prominent one. It refers to the '[d]imensions of the political environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure' (Tarrow, 1994: 85). It attempts to explain which structural aspects of the external world, outside the control of activists affect the development and success of social movements (Meyer and Minkoff, 2004).

This touches upon another debate amongst social movement scholars, between those adhering to the political process approach, foregrounding political opportunity structure and mostly focusing on historical large-scale political movements and those inspired by constructivism advocating for a cultural approach, emphasizing culture and identity and focusing on more fluid open movements that are political in a broad sense rather than a predominantly class-based one. The neglect of culture and the lack of a proper account for agency in favour of structural characteristics is prevalent in other disciplines as well, but from a culturalist perspective, Jasper and Goodwin (1999: 122) argue that 'this distortion is especially problematic in the study of politics and protest, which contain a great deal of intention and will, strategy and choice, desire and fantasy'.

Koopmans (1999: 102), a political process scholar himself, might offer us a potential way out of this, overcoming the stark contradiction between

structure and agency, between process and culture, much in the same way as mediation does. He argues that accounting for structures does not deny the potential for agency or even sudden change: 'When we say "opportunity structure," we just say that not all of opportunity is agency, but that some of it is structured'.

Media and communication usually feature as one of the peripheral factors that influence the degree of political opportunity for a social movement to succeed. However, some social movement scholars, addressing the role of media and of communication strategies for social movements more in-depth, have stressed the importance of positive exposure in the mainstream media for social movements. The extent to which movements are able to get their message across in the mainstream media or not, their degree of cultural influence in the public sphere could be described as the *media opportunity structure*. Following on from this, the conceptualization of a *discursive opportunity structure*, analytically semi-separate from the political opportunity structure, has been gaining strength (Ferree et al., 2002; Polletta, 2004; Koopmans, 2004; McCammon, et al., 2007). Besides this, while not described as such in the literature, we can also discern a *networked opportunity structure* being invoked since the end of the 1990s, pointing to the impact of ICTs and networks on the ability of movements to organize and mobilize (transnationally), to recruit, to coordinate actions and to disseminate counter-frames independent from the mainstream media (Keck and Sikkink, 1998; van de Donk, et al., 2004; della Porta and Tarrow, 2005).

What is being proposed here is to adopt the mediation opportunity structure as an overarching concept, semi-independent from the political opportunity structure, and comprised of the media opportunity structure, the discursive opportunity structure and the networked opportunity structure (cf. Figure 1). Inevitably the relationship between these three interrelated opportunity structures is circular and partially overlapping – they each impact on each other in various ways.
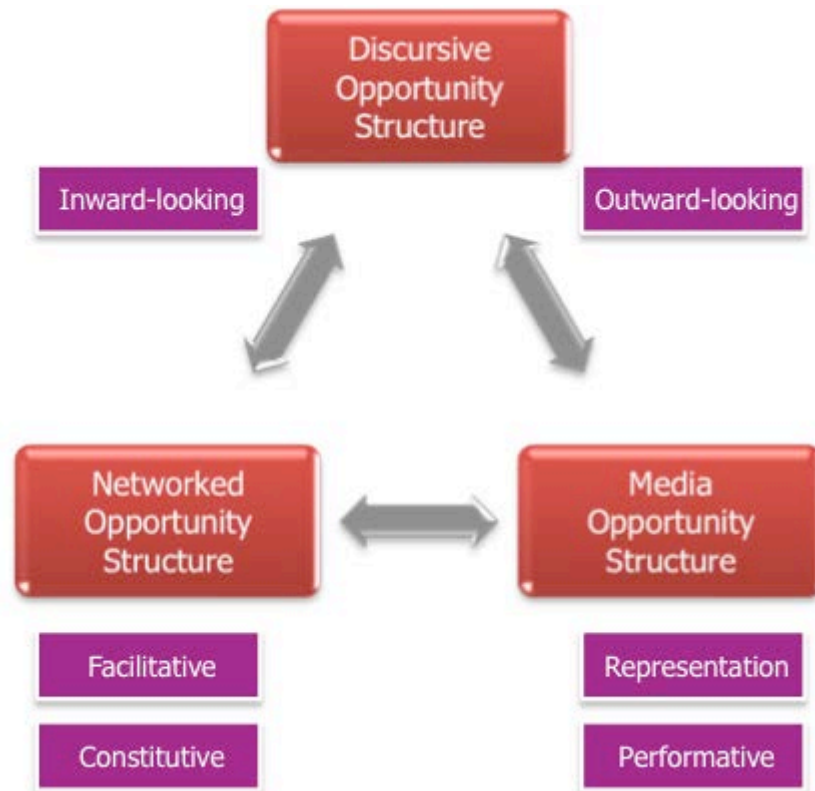
The Media Opportunity Structure

Media are not neutral actors; they are embedded in a socio-economic and political context. As a result of this, in the social movement literature, the relevance of media and communication is often reduced to being a part of the political opportunity structure – the outside world that enables social movements to emerge, but also constrains them. Media and communication infrastructures were largely seen as circumstantial and instrumental, a resource among others in struggles of social change.

Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993) represent an early exception in this regard as they positioned media central to their research, identifying opportunities and constraints that are specific to the media. They concluded that social movements use and need the media for three distinct purposes: (1) to mobilize for political support, (2) to legitimate and validate their claims in the mainstream public sphere and (3) to broaden the scope of conflicts beyond the like-minded. In addition to this, they argued that the nature of the coverage determines the public's perception of the movement and its goals. It is thus in the protest movements' interest to insure they receive 'positive' coverage. Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993: 166) do have a point when they state that: 'most of the people [social movements] wish to reach are part of the mass media gallery, while many are missed by movement-oriented outlets'.

Getting access to the mainstream media, influencing the public sphere, articulating alternatives and receiving positive exposure from the media, is not that straightforward for activists and protest movements due to the stiff

competition for attention from a diverse and wide spectrum of causes and organisations and the gate-keeping role the media fulfils in a democracy. Journalists are prime actors in this. While being a mediating force of the mainstream public sphere, they also have to cope with both internal and external pressures. This inevitably also brings the concept of media power and –ownership into play (Herman and Chomsky, 1988; McChesney, 2008).

Halloran, *et al.* (1970) concluded many decades ago that UK media employ an inferential structure of bias against protest and activism, primarily focusing on incidents of violence rather than on the large majority of peaceful demonstrators, the causes they promote or the messages they try to convey. Gitlin (1980) found similar patterns in the US, as did the Glasgow Media Group in relation to the reporting of UK-based industrial actions in the 1980s. Eldridge (1995: 212) argues that what is being presented as neutral reporting, is in fact 'an array of codes and practices which effectively rest upon a cultural imperative to hear the causes of disputes in one way rather than another'. Media are, in other words, 'not neutral unselective recorders of events' (Oliver and Maney, 2000: 464). It is thus unsurprising that this post-Althusserian perspective of the media as being an ideological apparatus dominated by state and capitalist interests and structurally biased against social and protest movements is also very prevalent in activist circles (McCurdy, 2010).

The main critique being directed against the propaganda and hegemonic models is that they assume a passive public, uncritically receiving and uniformly decoding messages distributed by the mass media. Furthermore, while many mainstream media organizations do conform to the analysis of the critical neo-Marxist tradition in media studies, not all mainstream media are at all times docile actors in the service of state and/or capitalist interests, as suggested by the propaganda model. As argued elsewhere (Cammaerts, 2007; Cammaerts and Carpentier, 2009) some mainstream media do at times report favourably on social movements or promote a progressive cause. The mainstream media is in other words not always exclusively negative towards social movements, protest and direct action. Cottle (2008: 5) observes in this regard that

> much has changed since earlier studies documented how the mainstream news media invariably report protests and demonstrations through a dominant law and (dis)order frame, labeling protesters as deviant, spectacle and violence

The argument here is not that such emancipatory fissures within the mainstream media are systematic or without inherent problems, but that it would be wrong to depict the entirety of mainstream media as monolithical or as per definition out rightly opposed to citizen and public interests.

Discursive Opportunity Structure

The role of the discursive in resistance has been ignored for many years as an important 'medium of social conflict and symbolic struggle' (Koopmans and Statham, 1999: 205). Media and communication, it is argued, has become a constitutive part of a discursive opportunity structure with its own logics,

institutions, and rules (McCammon, *et al.*, 2007). A potent illustration of the growing importance of discourse in the study of social movements and protest is the attention in the literature for framing strategies, which are deemed not only relevant for ideological positioning, but are also affecting recruitment, mobilization and the degree of action readiness (Snow and Benford, 1988). In relation to protest movements, Goodwin and Jasper (2003: 52) point out that

> [i]n order to attract people to join and remain committed to a movement, its issues must be presented or 'framed' so that they fit or resonate with the beliefs, feelings and desires of potential recruits [...] Frames are simplifying devices that help us understand and organizing the complexities of the world.

The implications of frames and frames for protest movements are, according to McAdam (2005: 119), that they have to contend with six strategic challenges if they really aim to become 'a force for social change'. The first challenges are *inward-looking*: recruiting core-activists, sustaining the movement and building collective identities. The four other challenges for activists can be characterized as more *outward-looking*: getting attention in the mainstream media, mobilising beyond those already convinced, overcoming social control, as well as possible repression and finally 'shap[ing] public policy and state action' (McAdam, ibid).

Most social movement literature has tended to focus primarily on outward-looking strategies, such as mainstream media framing or resonance – the importance of getting movement frames into the mainstream media (cf. the media opportunity structure). As Downing (2008: 42) observes in relation to Gamson's overview of media and social movements, 'it seems distinctly odd that the framing activities of social movements' own media, whether internally or externally directed or both, are so comprehensively off the map'. Indeed, the recent surge in academic attention for various forms of alternative movement media and communication practices by activists has to be accredited mainly to media and communication scholars such as Cottle (2000), Downing *et al.* (2001) and Atton (2002) to name but a few.

Another important facet of the process of self-mediation relates to the production of protest artifacts, which has become much easier and more cost-efficient due to the pervasiveness of digital photo and video recording devices (Baringhorst, 2008: 82-3). This has led protesters to photograph and film what they are seeing and experiencing, subsequently posting everything on social network platforms, sometimes even in real-time, and thereby producing an ever expanding archive of images and self-representations of protest events.

The material and permanent nature of these protest artifacts enables symbols and discourses embedded in them to be culturally transmitted on a long-term basis, feeding the struggle and contributing to the construction of a collective memory of protest (Melucci, 1996). In doing so, they effectively become 'epistemic communities' (Lipschutz, 2005), transferring knowledge and potentially influencing other movements through what is called 'movement spillover' (Meyer and Whittier, 1994). The protests in Tunisia spreading to

other Arab countries such as Egypt and Libya are a vivid illustration of this particular mediation opportunity.

Networked Opportunity Structure

Just as media, technology is not neutral either; at the same time, it is argued that its introduction in society leads to a process of negotiation. This process of negotiation involves strategies of resistance from users, either through the rejection of technology or through re-configuration of innovative user-patterns unforeseen by the developers of the technology. As Williams (1997: 328) points out:

> Although the designer may seek to prefigure the user – and thus implicitly constrain the ways a product is used – the final user still retains flexibility in the meanings they attribute to technology ... This often involves innovation by the consumer – using technology in ways not anticipated by the designer.

Relevant recent examples of this in the context of activism are the use of text messaging, Twitter or Facebook to mobilise for direct actions, to garner support, to recruit active members or to facilitate on-the-spot coordination of offline direct action. In this regard, increased lay-knowledge of how media and technology operates, reminiscent of Liebes and Katz's (1990) 'playful awareness', has become more commonplace and this is certainly the case amongst political activists and their relation with technology and media.

Networks are deemed to be highly beneficial in terms of transnational mobilization and organisation (Norris, 2001; della Porta and Tarrow, 2005). It not only became obvious that transnationalization was greatly simplified, the internet also enabled new organisational structures to emerge and expanded the repertoire of contentious action of protest movements by making mobilisation, independent content dissemination and the archiving of resistance more time and cost-efficient and exploiting the strength of weak ties inherent to networks (Haythornthwaite, 2005).

However, an over-emphasis on the internet as a platform risks obscuring the increased importance and use of mobile networks and text messaging to facilitate, organize and coordinate protest on-the-spot (Hermanns, 2008), as well as more traditional media such as radio, pamphlets or street art. Furthermore, in recent years, market-based social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have emerged as powerful tools for activists and movements to distribute counter-narratives and to facilitate mass mobilization; a potent example of the social shaping of technology (Kavada, 2010). During the 2010 UK student protests, the instant communication opportunity Twitter offered, was used extensively by protesters to keep track of police movements and to avoid being 'kettled' or contained. At the same time, the use of market-based platforms holds certain risks, certainly for radical activists, as Wikileaks, Anonymous and other (h)ac(k)tivists have been finding out in recent years.

Communication resistance practices are thus not merely limited to the use of media and communication as discursive weapons, nor can the use of ICTs by

activists be reduced to being merely instrumental for direct action in the offline world, ICTs have also become direct action in their own right, as hacktivist tactics or even the Free and Open Source Movement demonstrate (Jordan and Taylor, 2004; Söderberg, 2007). In addition to this, the pervasiveness of handheld cameras in the hands of protesters also enables so-called sousveillance tactics – surveilling the surveillers or bottom-up surveillance by the citizen/activist on the state or public figures. Sousveillance is the result of what Mathiesen (1997) calls the synoptic viewer society, the many watching the few. Filming and photographing police behaviour during demonstrations is mainly employed as a counter-tactic to expose police violence.

Furthermore, internet-mediated mobilisation practices, such as petitions or joining a Facebook-group also enable more passive forms of engagement and participation, which gets critiqued by some as click- or slacktivism (Morozov, 2009). However, through using the strength of weak ties protest movements can garner large-scale public support, construct collective identities and connect directly with potential sympathisers (Kavada, 2010). Such forms of lazy participation could be seen as insignificant or as a too easy way of pledging support for something without bearing the consequences of it, but they are highly relevant in terms of mediation as they seem to resonate with many citizens who often fail to make time in their everyday lives for active activism.

Conclusion

It is being argued here that the process of mediation, involving issues of media power, representation, agency, communication strategies and tactics by different actors, as well as the impact of all this on reception and de-coding, is most suited to encompass the various ways in which media and communication is relevant for protest movements and for resistance practices. The mediation opportunity structure, in its various articulation as media, discourse and network has become a constitutive part of the success or failure of a protest movement, each with their own logics, dynamics, institutions, and rules of engagement. The mediated opportunity structure, furthermore, points to the potential for audiences, users and citizens to resist dominant frames, appropriate ICTs in their everyday lives and become producers of media themselves.

Protest and the tactics deployed in order to voice dissent cannot be analysed in isolation from the broader multi-dimensional societal forces, from the counter-reactions of plural elites, and from their mainstream media representations through to the discursive struggles that underpin them – as such, the mediation opportunity structure is clearly enmeshed with the political opportunity structure, but there is certainly a case to be made for the distinct nature of the mediation opportunity structure as not only facilitative or instrumental, but also constitutive of direct action. It both enables and closes down opportunities for resistance and activists increasingly take this into account when surveying their repertoire of contentious action.

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