

# LSE Research Online

**Nick Couldry and James Curran**

## Beyond the hall of mirrors? Some theoretical reflections on the global contestation of media power

### Book section

**Original citation:**

Originally published in Couldry, N. and Curran, J. (eds.), *Contesting media power: alternative media in a networked world*. Critical media studies: institutions, politics, and culture, Lanham, MD, USA: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003, pp. 39-54. ISBN 9780742523852

© 2003 [Rowman and Littlefield](#)

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/10258/>

Available in LSE Research Online: Sept 2013

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

This document is the author's submitted version of the book section. There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

## **Beyond the Hall of Mirrors? Some Theoretical Reflections on the Global Contestation of Media Power**

**Nick Couldry**

**[7031 words, inc notes, excluding reff]**

‘there is no alternative communication without a social practice which determines and ratifies it.’ (Fernando Reyes Matta, quoted in Lozade and Kincar, 2000: 8)

This chapter asks: can we model theoretically the possibilities for contesting media power around the world? This is, already, a controversial starting-point because it isolates ‘media power’ as a separate dimension of social conflict, and thus goes against the trend of most social and media theory. This move is, however, important if the full comparative significance of much alternative media is to be grasped.

What is ‘media power’? Surely, you might ask, media institutions and media productions constantly register the influences of many forces outside themselves (state and corporate influences to name but two). Can ‘media’ possess a power that is contestable separately from the state or corporate sector’s representations of themselves through media? Certainly there are overlaps between the contestation of media power and other forms of power, but that does not mean that no distinctive social issues arise about media power, that is, the overwhelming concentration of most, if not all, societies’ symbolic resources in the separate institutional sphere we call ‘the media’, only that those issues often seem more remote than others. This is one result of the distinctive features of symbolic power in general.

‘Symbolic power’ is perhaps the least understood of the fundamental types of power (economic, political, military, symbolic). For, while at its most basic level, ‘symbolic power’ is easily understood as ‘the capacity to intervene in the course of events, to influence the actions of others and indeed to create events, by means of the production and transmission of symbolic forms’ (Thompson, 1995: 17), we have to grasp something wider: the effect of the overwhelming concentration of symbolic power in particular places, especially the media. In this concentrated form, symbolic power (including media power) is better defined as a ‘power of constructing reality’,<sup>1</sup> that is, social reality. To contest media power is to contest the way social reality itself is defined or named.<sup>2</sup> This is no easy thing, since it involves contesting the prevailing definitions of what is socially contestable; in particular, it means contesting media institutions’ preeminent position as our frame onto the ‘realities’ of the social world.<sup>3</sup> Much more than contesting specific media representations is involved.

Given these complexities, there is value in giving theoretical order to the divergent forms media power’s contestation might take – the purpose of this chapter. An image may help bring home what is distinctive about this approach. If, for a moment, we imagine contemporary power as a large, sprawling palace, economic, military and political power would occupy the central rooms with their own dedicated rear exits: sites where instructions are given, orders planned, and priorities decided. Today’s main forms of symbolic power, including media power, would be located in the entrance rooms to the palace, the mirrored halls where actors enter, wait and publicly exit. This image – of a palace complex of separate rooms and divided powers – is of course an illusion, since the pervasive transnational reach of today’s power-relations

and their complex interconnections make any architectural image of power unsustainable. In a notable rethinking of global power, Hardt and Negri (2000: xii) write of 'Empire' as 'a decentered and deterritorializing apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers'. All the more striking, then, that even Hardt and Negri, when thinking about resistance to Empire, retain a nostalgia for the mirrored space of global media events into which local acts of resistance to capitalism are sometimes transformed. 'Perhaps', they write, 'the more capital extends its global networks of production and control, the more powerful any singular point of revolt can be' (2000: 58). 'Any' singular point, whatever its conditions and location? Following the protests against global corporate values at Seattle and elsewhere, it is a seductive idea that, as global capitalism's functioning relies increasingly on global media, its vulnerability to local contestation increases exponentially. But, whatever temporary subsidy global media provide to the spread of resistant images, the result is rarely a redistribution of media power. The longer-term importance of Seattle lay not only in the media attention it generated, or its challenges to corporate values and global governance, but in a new and still continuing challenge to the infrastructure of global media power: the Indymedia movement (see Downing in this volume). But this is to turn from the comings and goings in global media's hall of mirrors to the conflicts over symbolic resources being waged in countless specific locations. It is on this distinctive thread within today's forms of global social conflict that I want to concentrate.

The concentration of symbolic power in specific institutional spheres is not, in itself, new. Medieval and early modern Western Europe was characterised by the intense concentration of symbolic power, and symbolic production, in the Catholic church, a concentration that the emergence of the printed book helped to undermine (Curran, 2002: chapter 2). From the late 17th century onwards, the modern state emerged not just as a concentration of economic and military power, but increasingly as a rival concentration of symbolic and definitional power, controlling by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the terms on which all corporations and individuals operated and even existed (for a developed theory of the French state in particular, see Bourdieu, 1996). The contemporary interrelations between the state's and the media's symbolic powers remain, however, largely uncharted.<sup>4</sup> In some late modern states, media power has come into conflict not so much with the state's as with religious institutions' symbolic power, for example in 1970s and 1980s Iran (Mohammadi and Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1994). Profound concentrations of, and contestations for, symbolic power are not therefore new, yet in many accounts by sociologists and political scientists, media power (the latest form of such concentrations) is either absent or collapsed into its supposed determinants in economic or state power. It is crucial to keep it distinct, if we are to grasp how not only corporate and state actors, but others (individuals and communities, NGOs and transnational networks) contest the local and global structures of media power. (All this – to emphasise the point once again – without ruling out the possibility, indeed the likelihood, that those actions overlap with contests over other forms of power and specific media representations.)

The insistence on the analytic separation of media power has implications for wider debates about media's social impacts. Contrary to one narrow version of the political economy thesis, media power is only partly about the ownership structure of media corporations and the infrastructure of media distribution. This (very real) political economy has a 'cultural' dimension: the universe of beliefs, myths and practices that

allows a highly unequal media system to seem legitimate (cf Couldry, 2000). This is why, in considering possible sites of resistance to media power, we must look not only at the distribution of economic and organisational resources, or contests over specific media representations of reality, but also at the sites from where alternative general frames for understanding social reality are on offer. Beliefs in the media's central place in social life can only be effectively challenged by alternative frames. This follows from the special nature of symbolic power as both practical resource (in the hands of particular people and institutions) and a long-term influence over people's beliefs about social reality. Put another way, as the quotation from Matta at the head of the chapter puts it, any lasting challenge to media power require a different social practice. Contesting media power, ultimately (there are, of course, many preparatory stages), means developing new forms of communication in the broader sense, that is, new ways 'in which people come to possess things in common' (John Dewey, quoted Carey, 1989: 22).

I will, first, tentatively review the possibilities for, and constraints upon, the contestation of media power, in a way, I hope, that stimulates comparative perspectives. Second, less abstractly, I will look at two specific visions of how media power might shift: one market-based (drawing on an interview with the founder of the online news platform *Out There News*) and the other community-based (drawing on documents recently circulated within the global Indymedia network).

### ***Contesting Media Power: where to start?***

In a sense, the answer is simple: 'just do things differently', echoing the phrase coined by the 1960s US activists, the Yippies, and more recently adapted both by Nike's global strategists and alternative videomakers.<sup>5</sup> In other words, the answer lies in practice. But why and how exactly should everyday practice be reconfigured, if sustainable challenges to media power are to emerge?

Contesting media power, in that sporting metaphor beloved of management gurus, means thinking 'outside the box'. The box in question is what the anthropologist Maurice Godelier called the little understood 'black box of those mechanisms which govern the distribution of the same representations among social groups with partially or profoundly opposed interests':<sup>6</sup> here the black box of 'the media'. The media are part of contemporary society's 'habitus' or (in Pierre Bourdieu's general sense of that term) its 'history turned into nature'.<sup>7</sup> Challenging the social order that passes for 'nature' means, at the very least, thinking differently about our own orientation to media. Consider the following from the Australian media and software activist, Matthew Arnison (I return to him later):

Old media technology creates a natural hierarchy between the storytellers and the audience. The storyteller has access to some piece of technology, such as a TV transmitter or a printing press. The audience don't . . .

Somewhere along the way, this has been justified by assuming that most people aren't that creative, that having only a handful of people to tell stories in a city of millions is a natural way of doing things. But is it? . . . (Arnison, 2002a: 1)

Beneath the fable-like phrase 'somewhere along the way' lies a whole (infamous) history of how, as part of a wider process of centralisation and government (cf

Mattelart, 1994), modern populations became accustomed to the idea that society's principal stories and images should be told from one place, 'the media', and that this 'place', while of public importance, was somewhere to whose everyday operations access was, for most members of the public, strictly controlled.

This concentration of symbolic resources (or 'media power' as I call it for shorthand) could not work if its operations were transparent, or if accepting it were a matter of explicit belief. Why believe that certain institutions have a special status in narrating the social world, privileged above individuals' accounts of living in that world? Media institutions depend on a silent division, reproduced across social space, between those who make stories and those who consume them. You can call it a 'division of labour', but that risks naturalising it as an irreducible economic 'fact'. Most of us have our work cut out, literally, to hold down a job (or jobs), look after our bodily needs and have some social life; consuming media is a thread (not necessarily a major thread) through most lives, but producing media is generally someone's else's job. Most of us don't have the time or resources to challenge the division between society's story-tellers and story-consumers.<sup>8</sup> Or rather, for the lucky ones among us who still have some choice, it does not seem to make sense to spend our limited 'free' time in contesting the large-scale inequalities underlying how and by whom society's stories are told. Except, perhaps, when we individually feel wronged by one of those stories; in earlier research, I foregrounded the accounts of people, not previously much exercised by media power, who experienced the everyday asymmetry of media operations on the ground (Couldry, 2000, Part 3). But precisely because the media process is so selective, such disruptive encounters are not most people's experience. Not only, then, as acknowledged earlier, are contests over the generality of media power often difficult to distinguish from other social contests channeled through media, but the very idea of contesting media power is difficult to articulate, because that power is so profoundly naturalised. So how are we to think about the possibilities for contesting media power in the general run of social life?

Symbolic power requires prior organisational and economic resources (to buy cameras, own radio frequencies, produce news stories) but, if accumulated on a sufficient scale, results over the long-term in something qualitatively different: influence over people's beliefs, in particular those beliefs (barely articulated) through which we frame the social world.<sup>9</sup> It follows that contesting media power is only possible if there exists a well-resourced social site outside media institutions from where a rival narrative authority over the social world can plausibly be enunciated. Where might such alternative concentrations of symbolic power be? Let's begin with corporations, the state and/or the military, and religious institutions.

Corporations are not a promising source for alternatives to media power, precisely because the business of selling is intimately bound up with the maintenance of market access, which in turn, in all contemporary societies, depends on the reach of media institutions. Occasionally, an embattled corporation's own myth-making is at odds with the media's working assumptions (for example, when employees of Arthur Andersen (US) recently used photo opportunities to project their loyalty to that firm's 'values', as it faced scandal for its role in the Enron collapse), but such cases will always be exceptional.

States are, *prima facie*, more promising, at least as a source of subsidy to those who want to build alternatives to media power: first, because states have their own well-established symbolic resources (to regulate state boundaries and definitions of citizenship, to control the terms on which business can and cannot operate, goods and images can circulate). Second, specific states may sometimes feel their interests are at odds with the agendas of media institutions. The occasions when (with or without the military, which we can avoid considering separately, since they generally lack symbolic resources of their own) states have contested media power are hardly to be celebrated (1970s Chile?). On the other hand, 20<sup>th</sup> century media history offers other examples of how the modern state's close interest in the rhetorical reach of emerging media (such as the BBC in Britain) subsidised institutional alternatives to complete media centralisation (for example, BBC regional programming, the 1960s/ 1970s 'access' television movement). Without such state subsidies, there could not have emerged the relatively balanced 'media ecology'<sup>10</sup> in countries such as Britain with their public service tradition. However, as the state's ability to influence global market structures declines, it is an increasingly precarious rival to media power, especially when state power, like corporate power, is increasingly dependent on media access to markets (usually called 'electorates').<sup>11</sup>

What of religious institutions, acting within or outside the ambit of the state? On the face of it, this is promising. In most societies religious institutions promulgate their own framing narratives of the social world, and indeed the cosmos, that are not directly reliant on media reference-points. The role of religious belief, as a site of challenges to the media 'frame', is one of the most neglected topics in media studies,<sup>12</sup> although after September 11 2001 its neglect is hard to defend. The importance of the Catholic church in the development of alternative, especially community-based, media in Latin America is discussed elsewhere in this volume (Rodriguez), but note the contribution of Paulo Freire's (1972) secular concept of 'conscientization' to that history. Religious institutions are, of course, not the only source of large-scale framing narratives: until 1989, state socialism, rightly or wrongly, was an obvious alternative, and both socialism and anarchism live on in different forms (again, see Downing in this volume), sometimes intersecting with media practice. In various fragmented ways, utopian and/ or religious visions are traceable in the current work of national and global NGOs, although generally NGOs do not engage in direct contestations of media power, since they, like corporate and state forces, depend on the existing reach of media institutions. Perhaps the most powerful alternative frame in current global politics is the World Social Forum's principle that 'another world is possible',<sup>13</sup> but as yet this has not been specifically applied to a critique of media power.

All this is admittedly schematic. Power does not flow in straight lines, nor are institutions the only source of power or its contestation. Actual contestations of power are usually the result of multiple forces. Such is the systemic complexity of media markets, for example, that they may sometimes, against corporate interests, generate alternative symbolic resources; similarly with state-subsidised media systems. In such cases, the only partly institutionalised force of civil society is crucial (Keane, 1998).

Rather than pursue further this institutional complexity, maybe we should ask a different question: what is the potential contribution to long-term shifts in media

power from changes in what individuals do with media? There are a number of dimensions along which we could look:

1. new ways of consuming media, which explicitly contest the social legitimacy of media power;
2. new infrastructures of production, which change who can produce media and in what circumstances;
3. new infrastructures of distribution which change the scale and terms on which symbolic production in one place can reach other places.

The first dimension (consumption) has been a striking absence from most accounts of alternative media until now (Downing, 2002), and almost as little is known about how people select from, or adjust for, the inadequacies of mainstream media.<sup>14</sup> Media consumption takes place largely in private, in what Sartre called ‘serial absence’,<sup>15</sup> so that the cumulative impact of individuals’ private media consumption for example is obscure. At what point, for example, will some people’s habit of getting news from a changing variety of localised web-sources (including semi-public networks and private testimonies) turn into scepticism about the truth-claims of large-scale news institutions? How significant, indeed, are these new habits, compared to Web use for more convenient access to newspaper and television news? Clearly we can currently only speculate on such questions, although it is worth insisting that individual practice cannot change independently of social assumptions about the trustworthiness of media and other institutions, which are linked to shifts in the infrastructures of knowledge production and distribution.<sup>16</sup>

This leads to the second and third dimensions, dimensions which are less familiar, since infrastructural changes are always difficult to isolate. The Internet has dramatically increased our interest in media infrastructure: first, because the Internet has increased the ease with which any digitalised material can be distributed across national, organisational and social boundaries; second, because new forms of open-source software are increasing the speed with which innovations in digital production can spread, at least among those with high computer literacy. The long-term impacts of these changes on media consumption, and people’s beliefs about the media’s social status remain uncertain, but it is, I suggest, to new hybrid forms of media producer-consumer that we should look for change, since they challenge precisely the entrenched division of labour (producer of stories versus consumer of stories) that is the essence of media power.

I am thinking, for example, of the Indymedia movement, with its local websites that always combine specialised production with an open invitation for non-specialists to contribute largely unedited news material; as a result, every Indymedia consumer is encouraged also to be a producer, which implies the opposite as well (that every Indymedia producer has to become a consumer of the media productions not just of fellow specialists, but also of the wider audience). Thus an explicit aim of the original Indymedia website at Seattle is ‘to empower individuals to become independent and civic journalists by providing a direct, unmoderated form for presenting media . . . to the public via the Internet’ (Seattle Indymedia, 2002: 2). Once again, however, these emergent forms of consumption-production are not isolated individual choices. They occur in certain places, under certain material conditions which perhaps are, and will always be, exceptional (small community networks linked to certain forms of

subsidy?). We need to know much more about the possibilities for sustaining such hybrid practices within, or at least alongside, increasingly ‘flexible’ labour markets.<sup>17</sup> And, even if such hybrid practices prove sustainable for some, who else outside Indymedia’s limited circle of consumer/producers knows about, and can be influenced by, these new practices? I return to such questions shortly.

Here the contestation of media power merges into the wider question of how social change is possible, and from where – very much an open question, as older forms of citizenship, community and politics undergo intense scrutiny.<sup>18</sup> As we saw earlier, such overlaps are to be expected, but this is not the end of the story. If, as Paul Clarke argues (1996: 125), ‘to be a deep citizen is to determine for oneself that an action is political’, then perhaps the concept of media is in equal need of redefinition: that is, who do we expect to participate in the process of mediation and from where? Which is a good point for the generalities of theory to make way for more specific and personal narratives.

### *Two Narratives of Change*

I want to pursue two different visions of change: the first from Matthew Arnison, one of the Australian developers of the open-source software on which the Indymedia websites across the world rely; the second from Paul Eedle, the UK founder of the website [www.megastories.com](http://www.megastories.com) which (under the title ‘Out There News’) gathered from the mid 1990s until early 2002 a huge range of individual stories about global news events from across the world, as well as valuable information archives on major news stories.<sup>19</sup> The first was developed within local community politics in Sydney and the global open-source software movement (Himanen, 2001), the second close to the mainstream news market (Eedle is a former Reuters journalist). I hope to show, however, that these differences are outweighed by the complementarity of those understandings ways to the underlying dynamics of media power.

### *‘Open Publishing’ and its Limitations*

Let’s begin with Arnison’s definition of ‘open publishing’ that he believes the Web enables and the Indymedia movement embodies:

Open publishing means that the process of creating news is transparent to the readers. They can contribute a story and see it instantly appear in the pool of stories publicly available. Those stories are filtered as little as possible to help the readers find the stories they want. Readers can see editorial decisions being made by others. They can see how to get involved and help make editorial decisions. If they can think of a better way for the software to help shape editorial decisions, they can copy the software because it is free and change it and start their own site. If they want to redistribute the news, they can, preferably on an open publishing site. (Arnison, 2002b: 1)

Arnison suggests that a real shift in media power must involve all dimensions of the media process (production, distribution, consumption, and the infrastructure that links them). Thus new ways of consuming information (from visibly edited online texts) may encourage people to participate in production, participation whose technical possibility depends on the formats made available through new, easily transferable

open-source software, creating an open field of media production/ consumption replicable on further linked sites.

This concept of open publishing is not abstract, but is linked to Arnison's vision of a new form of community media.<sup>20</sup> Arnison is a key producer of the Active Sydney website<sup>21</sup> (part of an Australian network of community information sites, which encourage individual postings). Active Sydney's aim is 'to tailor electronic communication to the needs of the community, rather than corporate or government interests' (Active Sydney, 2002). In his document on Open Publishing (Arnison 2002b), Arnison takes this notion of community media even further:

The most successful internet sites rely on the creativity of their users, not on professional producers as was the tradition with earlier electronic media . . . On the old one-way systems, community media was the exception. On the net, community media is very much part of the mainstream. (Arnison, 2002b: 6).

While the concept of 'community' remains a difficult one, it at least puts on the table issues of public use and public purpose. So too the Seattle IMC's Editorial Group states as one of its aims 'to maintain the [Indymedia] newswire and website as a community space' (Seattle IMC, 2002: 1).<sup>22</sup>

Some things remain uncertain about Arnison's (and equally Indymedia's) vision of participatory media. How broad is the social cross-section from which their producer/ audiences<sup>23</sup> are drawn? If 'open publishing is overwhelmingly done by volunteers' (Arnison, 2002b: 3), not paid workers, and, given the principle of 'copyleft' which Arnison adopts from the founder of the open-source movement, Richard Stallman (all material freely copiable, provided that when copied the original source is always transparent to the reader), the upshot is that Indymedia production is necessarily done in people's spare time. This restricts participation to those whose resources allow them to give up 'free' time in this way: people who already have to do two or three jobs to make ends meet are automatically excluded. There also other bases of exclusion, the most obvious, apart from literacy, being the computer skills necessary to convert material into the format required for use on Indymedia and similar sites.

Equally, we can ask about the non-producing audience for this new, more open media form. Indymedia UK's web statement is striking for its insistence that what it offers is not journalistic 'objectivity': 'Indymedia UK clearly states its subjectivity' (Indymedia UK, 2002).<sup>24</sup> The directness is refreshing, but it leaves unclear how the consumer of Indymedia UK's news is understood. Is a postmodern reader assumed who happily accepts that all truth is 'relative', or a reader committed to the rightness of a certain view of the world and its inequities? If the former, then the Indymedia news philosophy is less interesting than it seems, but if the latter, what degree of accountability to its audience does it accept?

The answer, I suggest, lies in a different vision of how news production and consumption are interrelated, a vision which, once again, Matthew Arnison articulates well through his notion of 'open editing' (Arnison 2002a): instead of editing happening behind the scenes, 'open editing' involves any reader being able to post an edited version of a text back onto the site where it was published, but with the editing steps and their author displayed in another file directly accessible on the site. This is

an engaging idea, although an important question remains about the actual social conditions under which sufficient such reader/producers are available.

### *Rethinking the Mainstream News Audience*

Another, in its way equally radical, vision of change to media power comes from Paul Eedle, the founder of the news site [www.megastories.com](http://www.megastories.com) which under the title 'Out There News' featured for some years minimally edited first-person stories about world events, either sent in by readers of the site or encouraged by its team of usually part-time 'stringers' around the world. The site attracted mainstream media attention for its personal stories after the terrorist attacks on September 11 2001, collected not just from the US but from Pakistan, Palestine and elsewhere in the Middle East.

The importance given to personal narratives and reader discussion was part of the site's original philosophy. As Paul Eedle explained when I interviewed him in his London home:

John West and I started Out There News because we thought that the on-line medium had a lot of potential that wasn't being exploited by mainstream organisations. We saw the potential, particularly in two areas. One was to provide in-depth news, news that you could explore context and background to current events. . . . we saw the potential with on-line to separate breaking news and the context and background . . . the idea was to produce explorable depth, using the multimedia nature of the medium, using audio, using images, using graphics and using different sorts of writing . . . The second direction, where we thought the medium was not being used by the mainstream was contributed journalism, to use the readers of the website as the sources. And there I think the mainstream still is being very conservative. We felt that on-line changed the relationship between journalists and the audience. It's not just a two-way relationship where readers can comment on what you put out but it . . . puts journalists or puts the audience on the same level as the journalist. And the journalist has to, has to earn the right to communicate by having something to say. And equally the audience may well know as much about the subject as the journalist and . . . if you're prepared to put that at the centre of the site, then I think you can produce radically new views of the world. (Interview with author, 11 July 2002)

The aim was to expand the potential of mainstream news production, not to offer a direct alternative. This affected the audience targeted ('we never really wanted to address a niche alternative audience . . . I have no interest in preaching to the converted') and readers' expected routes to the site (most of the site's finance came from contracts under which the site provided content via links to the web portal AOL and the NTL cable interface).

Out There News' editorial policy was quite different from Indymedia's avoidance of editorial intervention, combining normal principles of journalistic 'objectivity' (for example, in its information archives for particular 'megastories', and its concern that a totally open policy would risk the site 'becoming overwhelmed with rubbish') with a belief that editorial intervention should, nonetheless, be kept to a minimum. Editorial judgement was exercised in what major themes were highlighted for contributions and sometimes in facilitating particular narrators (for example, Abdul Malouk, a Pashtun

living in a refugee camp on the Pakistan/ Afghanistan border, who spoke no English and obviously had no computer access); but much of the material obtained was relayed largely unedited (interviews, diaries, and messages-boards linked to diary entries). We should not be blinded by Out There News' mainstream context so as to ignore the radicalness of this editorial philosophy. In effect, this was an experiment with journalistic control. Unlike in other largely dishonest attempts at media 'democratisation' (such as *Big Brother*), the Out There News diarists were given regular chances to update their diaries on their own terms and to respond at leisure to comments from readers. The journalist became, for some purposes, not reporter, but moderator, but without the ritualistic boundary-setting role common, for example, in television talk-shows (cf Couldry, 2002, chapter 7).

Underlying this shift in the journalist's role was a distinctive assessment of the 'ordinary' news consumer:

It was built on some assumptions about how people consume information on-line. . . we believed that people . . . came to the web in two modes. One was browsing mode to see what's there, you know, show me the latest. And the other was actively seeking information, a mode of actually seeking information. . . . That's why we set up Mega-Stories because we thought that people would actively seek information and that people would set their own agenda.

This assumed 'active reader' was understood by Eedle also as a potential producer:

I mean everybody quickly cottoned on to having message boards and doing live chat and so on. . . . although we were early doing that, we were also perhaps different in the importance we attached to it in saying that this wasn't kind of comment on the site, this was the site in some cases. (added emphasis)

If Arnison's 'open publishing' philosophy imagined a producer-consumer building production resources outside mainstream media institutions, Eedle imagined a consumer-producer emerging from the mainstream news audience. Out There News too, however, faced significant constraints. First, as already mentioned, its funding derived from the early period of AOL's and NTL's development when each had a clear interest in developing links to a range of content sources; funding was not renewed, leading to the eventual closure of new writing on the site in early 2002. Second, there was the need to exercise a degree of editorial control (given the funding arrangements, there was no option). This control was not transparent, so that Out There News would not qualify as 'open publishing' in Arnison's (2002b) definition, nor would it have wanted to. Nonetheless, Eedle's long-term vision for a future multimedia information and news platform is democratic in its ambitions:

. . . we would have a whole range of different levels of contributor from professional filmmakers with a broadcast background for whom this would be an interesting way to finance projects that wouldn't otherwise see air, down to activists and students and other people who are gaining multimedia literacy, video literacy, as equipment gets cheaper and skills spread. And of course there'd still be room for people without any media skills at all to contribute by us sending a crew to work with somebody to tell a story through their eyes.

However he is less sanguine than Arnison about the underlying skill constraints on opening up production:

I don't think that we should underestimate the level of skill that's needed to produce watchable you know, compelling television. . . . it is a wider range of skills and in fact, normally really a team effort compared to writing a readable textural contribution.

Even so, Eedle thought, the balance of power might shift: 'there are going to be an awful lot more people who can tell a story in video in the future than would ever get an airing on conventional television channels'.

While more limited and cautious than Arnison, Eedle's vision of an enlarged media mainstream is valuable for its clear grasp of the effective separation of most media consumption from activist practice:

I think that the value of a platform like Out There News is to encourage people who wouldn't otherwise contribute to contribute. And an activist will always find a way but it's encouraging, stimulating people who wouldn't imagine that their voice was worth hearing. Encouraging them to contribute is I think . . . an interesting ambition. (added emphasis)

Behind this lies Eedle's sense that the power of both media and political institutions is changing through the dispersal of information sources:

Media become less relevant because people now have multiple information sources which are not controlled by gatekeepers. Anybody can communicate anything and that means that people can find out whatever they need to find out for their particular issue . . . So there is a very large irrevocable shift of power away from hierarchical bureaucracies whose hey-day was in a 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century industrial state, a huge spread of power away from bureaucracies to individuals which . . . has effects every aspect of public life and politicians will need to catch up with it.

Whether right or wrong, this is hardly a trivial vision of the links between media power and social change.

### ***In place of a conclusion***

We have followed in some detail two different visions of how the landscape of media power may be changing, the first developed on the margins of institutional media production, the second from near its centre, but each illuminating the axes of change within the media sphere (production, distribution, consumption) and the sphere of 'the political'.<sup>25</sup> We arrive back at the question of framing, which was central to the earlier, more theoretical section of this chapter. As we look towards future challenges to the structures of media power, the question of framing can be put more specifically: what are the social purposes for which we use and make media, and are they changing? Instead of providing a neat resolution to that question, I want, finally, to translate it into further unanswered questions about long-term changes in media's place in social and political life.

Recall another period when changes in communication technology contributed to fundamental long-term shifts in the organisation of social and political life: the spread of the printed book in the early modern era in Western Europe. Robert Wuthnow in his book *Communities of Discourse* (Wuthnow, 1987) analyses the factors that contributed to major ideological shifts such as the Reformation and the birth of modern democratic politics, and sees the book and the new information networks it made possible as essential. What is so useful about Wuthnow's analysis is that it encompasses the social contexts which came into being around the book: the new or altered networks (church, school, political party) where the technology of the book was central, the many paths that allowed those networks to connect with other spaces, such as formal political arenas, the new circuits for the distribution of ideas that emerged in printed form (journal, newspaper), and above all the social hierarchies that arose in the course of those changes: the birth of the literary public sphere and the social exclusions on which it was based (the coffee-house versus the market-square). Without addressing new media (he was writing in 1987), Wuthnow helps us imagine the social architecture through which communication technologies become socially established and the way new power relations inhere within them.

Few would doubt the potential significance of computer-based communication interfaces for the future of media power, but the Internet's first prophets were blind to questions such as Wuthnow's. In the spirit of Wuthnow, we can ask some new questions. Regardless of current hopes to the contrary, will the Internet come to be seen primarily as a quasi-private space (just as casual conversations on the street are almost never thought of as publicly significant – they occur in a private sub-zone of public space), or will the Internet indeed become a genuine supplement to or replacement for existing mediated public space? What hierarchies will develop between the Internet and other public or private spaces, or between certain Internet spaces and others? Will those hierarchies prove as socially entrenched as those around the 20<sup>th</sup> century's main electronic media? If so, will the result be to undermine, or further entrench, media power?

There is one key paradox that may prove crucial in all this; a paradox lived out by most of us daily, although less often articulated. This is the shift over 150 years from a world with insufficient information flows (the 'crisis of control' in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century that James Beniger (1986) saw as the driving force behind not only modern communications, but also the birth of 'scientific' management and accounting) to a world where there is now too much information (many times over), in effect a reverse 'crisis of control', where the highest premium applies not to information production but to information selection. Media are part of that information excess but, in so far as media are leisure, not compulsory, activities, are especially vulnerable to drastic shifts in how people select from the information and image environment.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps we are entering an era when many of us will want to look more closely at where and to what end we obtain news about the world.

A virtue of producers outside mainstream media channels – those concerned, at least in part, with contesting media power itself – is that they refuse to take for granted the question of what social ends media serve, and those ends' connection with that hard-pressed ideal we call 'democracy'. If so, there is reason to believe that their voices will be heard more clearly in this century's expanding media universe than in the last.

### *Acknowledgements*

Many thanks to Paul Eedle for giving up his time to be interviewed. The final section draws on a response I gave to Manuel Castells at a Symposium on New Media organised by [Media@lse](#) in London, October 2001; thanks to Robin Mansell and Roger Silverstone for providing the context that stimulated these ideas. Thanks to James Curran for his helpful criticisms of an earlier draft. Thanks to Alan O'Connor for permission to quote from his translation of Lozade and Kincade (2000).

## References

- Active Sydney (2002) 'What are the aims of active-sydney?', <http://www.active.org.au/sydney/about> last accessed 4 September 2002.
- Arnison, Matthew (2002a) 'Crazy Ideas for Webcasting'. <http://cat.org.au/cat/webacast.html> last accessed 4 September 2002.
- (2002b) 'Open Publishing Document'. <http://cat.org.au/maffew/cat/openpub.html> last accessed 4 September 2002,
- Bacon-Smith, Camille (1992) *Enterprising Women*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Beniger, James (1986) *The Control Revolution: Technological and Economic Origins of the Information Society*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- Born, Georgina and Prosser, Tony (2001) 'Culture and Consumerism: Citizenship, Public Service Broadcasting and the BBC's Fair Trading Obligations', *Modern Law Review* 64(5): 657-687.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1977) *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- (1991) *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- (1996) *The State Nobility*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Carey, James (1989) *Communication as Culture*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.
- Clarke, Paul (1996) *Deep Citizenship*. London: Pluto.
- Couldry, Nick (2000) *The Place of Media Power*. London: Routledge.
- (2002) *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach*. London: Routledge.
- (forthcoming) 'Media, Symbolic Power and the Limits of Bourdieu's Field Theory', [Media@lse](http://www.media@lse.ac.uk) Electronic Working Papers series.
- Curran, James (2002) *Media and Power*. London: Routledge.
- Downing, John (forthcoming, 2003) 'Audiences and Readers of Alternative Media: the absent lure of the virtually unknown', *Media Culture & Society* .
- Freire, Paulo (1972) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Penguin: Harmondsworth.
- Godelier, Maurice (1986) *The Mental and the Material*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Goffman, Erving (1975) *Frame Analysis*. Penguin: Harmondsworth.

- Harding, Thomas (1997) *The Video Activists' Handbook*. London: Pluto.
- Hardt, Michael and Negri, Antonio (2001) *Empire*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- Himanen, Pekka (2001) *The Hacker Ethic and the Spirit of the Information Age*. New York: Random House.
- Hoover, Stewart (forthcoming) *Religion in the Media Age*. London: Routledge.
- Indymedia UK (2002) 'Mission Statement vs 0.9 17.05.02'. <http://uk.indymedia.org/ms.php3> last accessed 4 September 2002.
- Jenkins, Henry (1992) *Textual Poachers*. New York: Routledge.
- Keane, John (1998) *Civil Society: Old Images, New Visions*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Keck, Margaret and Sikkink, Kathryn (1998) *Activists Beyond Borders*. Cornell: Cornell University Press.
- Lazade, Fernando and Kincar, Gridvia (2000) 'The Miners' Radios of Bolivia: an historic experience of self-managed communication' unpublished translation by Alan O'Connor of chapter from F. R. Matta (ed) (1983) *Comunicacion Alternativa y Busquedas Democraticas*. Santiago: Chile. ILET/ Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.
- Lodziak, Conrad (1987) *The Power of Television*. London: Frances Pinter.
- Martin-Barbero, Jesus (1993) *Communication, Culture and Hegemony*. London: Sage.
- Matterlart, Armand (1994) *The Invention of Communication*. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press.
- Melucci, Alberto (1996) *Challenging Codes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Meyer, Thomas (forthcoming 2002) *Media Democracy*. Cambridge: Polity
- Mohammadi, Ali and Sreberny-Mohammadi, Annabelle (1994) *Small Media Big Revolution*. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press.
- O'Connor, Paul (1995) 'Talking Turkey with Television' in booklet accompanying *Undercurrents* [video magazine] 4, Oxford: Undercurrents Productions.
- Rennie, Ellie (2002) 'Community Media: Fenced Off or Walled Out? Finding a Space of Community in the New Media Environment', paper presented at IAMCR conference, Barcelona, July 2002.
- Rodriguez, Clemencia (2001) *Fissures in the Mediascape*. Creskill, NJ: The Hampton Press.

Rubin, Jerry (1970) *Do It!* New York: Simon and Schuster.

Seattle IMC (2002) 'Editorial Collective Statement'. <http://seattle.indymedia.org/policy> last accessed 4 September 2002.

Sellers, John (2001) 'Raising a Ruckus', *New Left Review* [ns] 10: 71-85.

Silverstone, Roger (1988) 'Television Myth and Culture' in J. Carey (ed) *Media, Myths and Narratives*. Newbury Park: Sage.

----- (1994) *Television and Everyday Life*. London: Routledge.

Snow, David and Benford, Robert 'Master Frames and the Cycle of Protest' in A. Morris and C. Mueller (eds) *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*. Yale: Yale University Press.

Thompson, John (1995) *The Media and Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity.

Wuthnow, Robert (1987) *Communities of Discourse*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.

Zimmerman Umble, Diane (1992) 'The Amish and the Telephone Line: Resistance and Reconstruction' in R. Silverstone and E. Hirsch (eds) *Consuming Technologies*. London: Routledge.

---

<sup>1</sup> Bourdieu (1991: 166).

<sup>2</sup> Cf Carey (1989), Melucci (1996).

<sup>3</sup> Silverstone (1988), Couldry (2000: chapter 1).

<sup>4</sup> See Couldry (forthcoming) for further discussion.

<sup>5</sup> See Rubin (1970), O'Connor (1995).

<sup>6</sup> Godelier (1986: 14).

<sup>7</sup> Bourdieu (1977: 78).

<sup>8</sup> For the best explanation of how this division and its ideological consequences are embedded in the organisation of production, see Lodziak (1987).

<sup>9</sup> Here I am drawing on and generalising the concept of frame which originated in Goffman's sociology (Goffman, 1975) but has been most actively used in the analysis of social and political movements (for example, Snow and Benford, 1992, Keck and Sikkink, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> Born and Prosser (2001: 63).

<sup>11</sup> See Meyer (2002) on the long-term consequences of media dependence on the political process.

<sup>12</sup> For rare exceptions, see Zimmerman Umble (1992), Hoover (forthcoming).

<sup>13</sup> See paragraph 2 of the Charter of Principles, available via [www.forumsocialmundial.org.br](http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br).

<sup>14</sup> For a pioneering study, see Lembo (2000).

<sup>15</sup> Quoted, Lodziak (1987: 175).

<sup>16</sup> Cf Silverstone (1994).

<sup>17</sup> Here there is a great deal to be learned from earlier studies of spare-time fan-producers (Jenkins, 1992; Bacon-Smith, 1992).

<sup>18</sup> On citizenship, see Clarke (1996), Rodriguez (2001). For a fresh look at the significance of the 'community' dimension to community and alternative media, see Rennie (2002), which discusses in particular the practice of the 'Active.org' community media websites in Australia which Matthew Arnison and others have pioneered.

<sup>19</sup> The site remains a useful source, but since spring 2002 as an archive only.

<sup>20</sup> I have learned a great deal on this point from Ellie Rennie's recent paper (Rennie, 2002).

<sup>21</sup> [www.active.org.au/Sydney/](http://www.active.org.au/Sydney/)

---

<sup>22</sup> It is perhaps significant that the word 'community' is not used in the web statement of Indymedia UK, since Britain is a country where the term 'community' has been particularly abused by various Conservative and Labour governments (Indymedia UK, 2002).

<sup>23</sup> Assuming they are largely separate, which may not be the case.

<sup>24</sup> Cf Harding (1997: 22-23).

<sup>25</sup> I stress 'the political' rather than the narrow sphere of formal 'politics' (cf Wolin, 1995).

<sup>26</sup> For an interesting and unusual consideration of the implications of information excess on alternative media, see the interview with John Sellers, director of the Ruckus Society that was active in the Seattle anti-globalization protests (Sellers, 2001: especially at 83-4).