

Integrating different levels of counter-hegemonic communication

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For activist groups, for communities and for social movements, what is the relation, and what would be the most productive relation, among four terrains of media: (1) commercial media; (2) grassroots community media; (3) Internet-connected media; (4) public art (street theatre, political/satirical song, murals, graffiti)? We will discuss specific examples of each terrain, with help of experiences and information from the workshop participants, and other experiences presented in the pdf readings.

Sarah Berger's text provides us with two issues. One: the difference between the possibilities *and the problems* of mobilization today via ICTs, and preceding tactics – and their combinations. Two: the media roles which people over 35 can play in social movements, an aspect which – unsurprisingly! – particularly interests me. In the South African street theatre example which we will consider a little later, generational conflict had many negative dimensions, and given that it was not a class, ethnic or even gender conflict, an adequate political vocabulary was lacking to analyze it.

Martin Shaw's essay focuses on the problem of antiwar activism and strategies to influence commercial news media. Given the situation in Afghanistan, in Iran, in

Palestine and Israel, in Pakistan, U.S. aggressiveness, the huge militarization of China, the reactive militarization in India, this issue is of the highest importance.

Shaw proposes that commercial news media are fundamental means to develop a major social movement, and that activists can read even negative coverage 'between the lines'. He claims there is a typical cycle of demonstration-coverage-bigger demonstration-even more coverage-even bigger demonstration. But he also insists that the dynamic of the simple, unifying slogan, very effective in a mobilization campaign against a war in and of itself, is no substitute for a comprehensive strategy regarding war..

As examples he takes the 1980s antinuclear movement, and the 2002-2003 movement against the Iraq war. Shaw proposes that these movements suffered from weak sustainability, notwithstanding their enormous short-run size, because of their lack of policy on the issue of human rights abuses in the Soviet bloc countries, or on Saddam's tyranny. As a consequence, success in size, failure of result.

I do not agree with Shaw's analysis in his characterizations either of the failure of the antinuclear movements, or of the necessity to intervene against regimes such as Saddam's. Nonetheless, in my opinion it is true that the relation between simple opposition – *No to War!* – *No to nuclear arsenals!* – and a comprehensive policy on war should not be left to the conventional political parties to monopolize. The challenge then for movements and their media, and their strategies in the corporate media sphere, is how effectively to combine these two levels of practice.

Nancy Snow offers some practical advice to activists from her own experience of negotiating – not always with success – with corporate news media. She says that we have to work with all news media; we have think very concretely concerning our

objective, of who ought to be the reader, the audience; we have to avoid preaching, but use people's already strongly held ethical convictions; we have to proceed to the mind via the heart; we have to know those journalists whose beat is close to the movement's priorities, and understand their margins for maneuver; and we have to avoid confusing journalists with their bosses and corporate owners.

Belinda Bozzoli's chapter on street theatre in South Africa presents two problems, but of a different type.

One is that the writer describes big political funerals, a form of street theatre different from, for example, the street theatre of an Augusto Boal, which is characteristically organized by an activist group to develop political awareness among passersby, and which has more or less developed scripts of a dramatic kind.

The street theatre of the Alexandra township, or "Alex", by contrast, was organized for the most part among the inhabitants themselves, without a specific director, and had aspects of a secular ritual, with any surprise or *dénouement*, although it had elements of very powerful emotion and almost unbearable tension. The majority of the victims were young people, and almost all fell in combat with the class and racist system which was *apartheid*. Their deaths were not the normal tragedies of everyday life. And they made up a crucial dimension of the "Six-Day War" of February 1986, in which the people of "Alex" fought fiercely for 24 hours a day against the forces of the racist order, in a massive explosion of rage.

We will return in a moment to the details of this street theatre, but we need first to address the second problem: the South African context, which is often known in its general outlines, but sometimes gets dissolved in a heroic binarism of white racists and

activists of color. The advantage of Belinda Bozzoli's analysis is that it never simplifies the South African political situation in a Manichean fashion – a racist anti-racism! – although her hostility to the *apartheid* regime is evident throughout. But to understand the context better, it is necessary to list some of its most relevant elements.

One: the *apartheid* system was designed as a combined and highly detailed machine to ensure cheap labor of color, and to arrange this labor power into specific geographical areas with tightly policed frontiers. The workers had to travel to their jobs from their permitted areas six days a week, often two-three hours in each direction – a policy conceived to reduce them to labor power and nothing more. The system was founded in principle during the British empire, but after 1948 the new government, elected only by the white electorate whose majority was of Dutch origin (the Afrikaners), systematically developed it down to the smallest details. This required a brutal police state.

Two: in 1986, the period of this research, the resistance had four parts. The ANC (African National Congress, today the government, and a non-‘racial’ organizations from its foundation in 1911) had underground cadres inside the country, but its leaders and recruits had to live in other African countries far from the South African frontier. There was also a growing minority of whites who wanted to see profound change in the country, but they have no bearing on our specific topic here.

In the areas permitted to black South Africans was to be found the majority of those resisting the regime, but they were made up of an older generation living in often sharp tension with a younger generation. The former had survived the lethal confrontations of 1976 and 1983, but had lost hope in the collapse of the apartheid

system, too powerful given the military, commercial and diplomatic support of the capitalist powers. The older generation considered the new generation lacked sufficient education, and had no respect for its parents and elders. The second generation, impatient and impetuous, visualizing an instant utopia of “Alex’s” independence inside the *apartheid* system, considered the older generation more as people who had failed, who did not have the necessary determination. There was often fear and contempt between the two generations.

And one other important point: in the second generation there were many more men than women activists, and the women were also typically younger than their brothers. The gender dynamic thus played an important role in the scenario, and not just in this way. People’s courts also developed, organized by young people, to punish the daily domestic and street violence and to avoid reliance on the local black police, often very corrupt and brutal. Initially these courts were strongly supported by the women of the older generation, up until the point when some courts began to function as unaccountably in their way as the courts of the *apartheid* system.

The political funerals were already a ritual in “Alex” and similar townships, but in the days after the “Six-Day War” they drew huge participation by the “Alex” population. There were popular songs, flags, poetry, slogans, speeches by national opposition leaders (like Bishop Desmond Tutu), symbols of the banned African national Congress, the *toyitoyi* dance, and also wakes overnight before the funerals, along with a traditional ritual of washing the hands after the burial. The funerals were done in “Alex’s” big stadium, with 45,000 participants. In the biggest funerals, there was a row of coffins, like crosses in a military cemetery, symbols of the national struggle.

The organization of this people's theatre had at least three social components. There were the authorities, who insisted on excluding speakers sympathetic to the African National Congress, on excluding radio and television, and from time to time tried to reduce the number of coffins. There were the community's authentic leaders, who wanted ceremonies and speeches that were passionate but also disciplined. And there was the youth, often impatient with appeals for calm and very mistrustful of the leaders.

I think all these elements and dimensions of people's theatre in the political funerals in "Alex" of those years are not simply fascinating, but also very important as indices of the **normal complexity** of social movements and especially of their media of communication and expression. This case also introduces the problematic of immediate results and successes, of the urgency required at this very moment, and the practical and psychological necessities of an extended struggle over time. What roles to 'our' media have in such conflicts between the present and the future? And how best to discover and activate the strongly resonant symbolic themes which are going to live beyond the present moment?

The chapter by Patrick Burkart takes in another direction, toward to the realm of cyberliberties and the challenge to Digital Rights Management in music. He uses the concept of "colonization of the lifeworld" of the German author Jürgen Habermas, to characterize the perpetually growing dominion of corporate power and the State over our daily and community lives. He also makes reference to the phrase "the Celestial Jukebox" which he and Thomas McCourt, his co-author of another book, coined in order to designate the legal control system of free digital access to musical communication that the four biggest firms in this sphere, with between 72-87% of the global market – Sony-

BMG, Vivendi-Universal, Warner, EMI – have been introducing over the past ten years, trying to block person-to-person file-sharing and to destroy the place of music as an integral part of the cultural Commons.

Burkart specifies four types of resistance to this perpetually expanding cyberdominion. They are: alternative media activists; radical media activists; ‘culture-jammers’; and ‘hacktivists’. He offers numerous examples, but his distinction between ‘alternative’ and ‘radical’ is between those who pressure the government and/or the corporate sector to open up and free access to cultural goods and to the public’s voice, and those who organize different types of independent, counter-hegemonic, horizontal media.

I think these analyses and ideas provide us with sufficient material to reflect together on the media issues that concern us here.