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# **Contesting Media Power**

*Alternative Media  
in a Networked World*

EDITED BY NICK COULDRY AND JAMES CURRAN

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Part I

# INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

## CHAPTER 1

# The Paradox of Media Power

*Nick Couldry and James Curran*

To say that “the media are powerful” is a cliché, yet to ask in what media power consists is to open a riddle. Or so it seems. In the chapters that follow, we intensify this paradox by extending it to a global scale but also, through the rich comparative detail that is generated, aim to show that the paradox is more illusory than real.

One way of defining media power, if an unwieldy one, is as a label for the net result of organizing a society’s resources so that the media sector has significant independent bargaining power over and against other key sectors (big business, political elites, cultural elites, and so on). This seems straightforward until one realizes that the media’s bargaining power (for example, over the framing of a particular story) is of a curious sort: Media are unable to bargain over the basic rule of their existence, which is that they depend on “content” generated *by others*. (Or at least they did: One interpretation of the recent spread of celebrity stories and “reality” coverage in the press and television in the United States and Europe is that rising economic costs of news production have forced media to generate their own “contents” and treat them as if they were “external” reality.)

Here we come to the heart of the apparent paradox about media power, which derives from the fact that such power faces two ways. From one direction (the more common direction of analysis) “media power” is a term we use to point to how *other* powerful forces use the intermediate mechanism of media (press reports, television coverage, websites, and so on) to wage *their* battles (big business against labor, old professional and class elites against new cultural elites, and so on). From this direction, media power disappears; it is merely the door through which the contestants for power pass en route to battle. We find this approach, for example, in Manuel Castells’s recent theory of the global “network society,” in which he argues that in a space of accelerated information, people, and finance flows, the media portal is increasingly important for all social action, but the media themselves have no power as such (1997: 312–17). That this direction of analysis often has precedence is only to be expected; in studying the media’s social role, our priority (whether as researchers or as social actors) may well be to analyze competing forces outside the media, whose conflict is waged in part through media coverage.

There is, however, another, equally valid direction of analysis from which media power does not disappear. This view holds that, contrary to the illusion that media only “mediate” what goes on in the rest of society, the media’s representational power is one of society’s main forces in its own right. From this perspective, media power (direct control over the means of media production) is an increasingly central dimension of power in contemporary societies (Melucci, 1996; Curran, 2002). It follows that, as with most forms of power, media power is not generally made explicit by those who benefit from it: the media. No wonder it is rarely the direct subject of public debate.

This second direction of analysis rejects the fallacy in traditional “fourth estate” conceptions of media and the liberal models based upon them. Far from media simply being there to guard us against the overweening influence of other forms of power (especially government), media power is itself part of what power watchers need to watch (see, for example, Curran and Seaton, 2003; Keane, 1991). On this view, even if we cannot imagine a society where media power is the *first* mover of social action (since without other forces, such as economic and political power, there would be nothing for media to represent), media power remains a very significant dimension of contemporary reality. In short, media power is *an emergent form of social power* in complex societies whose basic infrastructure depends increasingly on the fast circulation of information and images.

That, however, is not the end of the paradox. If we turn to the book’s main subject—how power is contested under different but structurally comparable conditions across the world—it becomes obvious that media power is rarely the *explicit* subject of social conflict. This is not because media power isn’t a “hard” type of power, like economic power, but rather because even “soft” forms of power (those relating to struggles over identity and respect, for example) involve conflicts whose main actors rarely fight for media power as such. Thus, for example, feminist struggles in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s sought to challenge patriarchy, thereby overriding any specific concerns about capturing media resources as a tool in that conflict.

This, however, is not the only possibility. As the reader will discover many times in this book, a conflict that appears initially to be about other forms of power turns out, in part, to be about relative control over society’s representational resources (see, for example, the chapters by Gross, Lim, and Rodriguez). In some conflicts, parties may come to see their own relative lack of influence over how they are represented as being at stake in their struggle—or, at least, as Todd Gitlin (1980) described in his classic account of the 1960s U.S. student rebellions, as seeming crucial after the event. Contests over access to the means of media production are important, for example, in current antiglobalization battles.

The example of the global Independent Media Center movement and its role in antiglobalization struggles runs like a thread throughout this book (see especially the chapters by Bennett, Couldry, and Downing). Why does this example stand out? Perhaps because media power itself is an increasingly important *emergent theme of social conflict* in late modernity, as the mechanisms for representing social conflict themselves multiply. This is not the first time in history that media power has been explicitly contested; it was crucial to the French Revolution, to the slow social and cultural revolutions against Soviet rule in Eastern Europe in the 1970s and 1980s (Downing, 2001), and to the Iranian revolution of the 1970s (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi,

1994). What was missing from those major conflicts was access by all sides to global means of self-representation, which could change the scale on which those conflicts were played out. The Internet, particularly through its linkages into traditional media, now gives any local actor the potential to reach global audiences (Hardt and Negri, 2000). As the scale-effects of media transform specific conflicts, it is possible that social actors may start to compete explicitly for influence over those scale-effects (that is, over media power). At the very least, a comparative look at how media power can be, explicitly or implicitly, contested in different places under different conditions is needed, as media studies attempt to globalize its discourse (Curran and Park, 2000).

## Two Images

The shift between conceptions of media power that this book reproduces is captured through two contrasting images.

On the one hand, the media may be imagined as a waterfall whose intensity, size, and impact on the ground below (whose “power,” in a word) depend almost entirely on the weight and direction of water collected on the land behind the waterfall; no one would say that the waterfall itself has “power,” properly speaking, even though the particular configuration of rocks at the waterfall’s edge would have a minor influence on the way water falls below. But that influence is infinitesimal compared with the mass and direction of water behind the waterfall. So too the term “media power” in traditional analysis is only a figure of speech for the media’s role as a conduit for *other* forms of power, much larger than the media.

We, on the other hand, think of media power as more like a processing plant, built near the waterfall, and receiving all the diverted water and converting it into something quite different—first, energy and by-products of that energy, and, second, information on the amount of water farther upstream. Suppose that this water was the main energy source in our imaginary society; information about its pressure and volume would be vital for society as a whole. In this situation we *might* treat the processing plant as a “black box” and concentrate only on the flows across the plain, but this would be a great mistake. What about the efficiency of the processes that convert the water pressure into energy and the choices as to where that energy is sent, who controls it, and to what purpose? What if public readings of water flow are systematically inaccurate because the measuring instruments are incorrectly calibrated?

Here we see that the relationship between wider social forces (the flowing water) and media output (the energy and informational outputs of the processing plant) is not natural; it has nothing in common with a waterfall. So we must open up the “black box”—that is, enter the plant and study how decisions are made, who influences them and who doesn’t, and analyze the consequences of those decisions (and exclusions) in the longer term. Once these questions are opened up, others follow; these are explored in the remaining chapters of part I (Bennett and Couldry).

This second image of media power invites us to think concretely about the *range of power sources* whose influence might be called upon to challenge the existing



decision-making elite that runs our imaginary processing plant. Those wanting to challenge the processing plant's mechanism (which stands in, according to this image, for media power) might turn to *the state*. Part II of the book accordingly examines a range of perspectives on how the state directly or indirectly subsidizes challenges to existing configurations of media power. Another force, especially in countries dominated by market models of media provision (the majority of countries in the world), would be *the market*. Part III looks at how media markets of a certain complexity can generate, over time, alternatives to existing concentrations of media power. Yet another source of potential challenge would be the whole range of forces we call *civil society*, including various forms of religious organization and authority. Part IV looks at how particular elements of civil society have either become contestants for media power themselves or subsidized others to challenge media power.

Inevitably this scheme simplifies how different social forces compete explicitly or implicitly over the power represented by existing media institutions. Overlaps are crucial, of course, but we hope that the divisions around which the book is organized will highlight certain key comparisons.

Having considered the comparison between power sources on which challenges to media power might rely, we now need a different comparison relating to media technology. For our processing plant, we can imagine at least two different ways in which technological change might influence challenges to its media power: first, by enabling new types of processing plants, to be built as rivals, that divert water earlier or even extract energy in different ways and, second, by connecting the energy or information supply generated by the original processing plant to other processing plants across the world, thus perhaps linking the populations served by all those plants into a large-scale struggle. New media represent both types of change, affecting the local bases of media power and the scale on which it can effectively be contested. Part V considers various examples along these lines.

Before looking more closely at the detailed comparisons that emerge across the course of the book, we need to clarify one additional term: "alternative media."

## Alternative Media: The Forgotten Land

The process we call "media" is the historic result of countless local battles over who has the power to represent the reality of others. Once such battles are won, they generally cease being remembered as battles. Who, for example, outside a small circle of media scholars, gives thought to the early days of dispersed radio production in the U.K. or France? The forward drive of media development not only foreshortens the past but obscures the present; yet in the shadow of even well-established concentrations of media power, contests continue to be fought for access to media resources or distributional opportunities. As social conflicts rise and subside, media power is frequently at least an incidental aspect of struggle; such was the case in the 1990s, when the broad front of popular protests against the long-standing conservative regime in Britain generated new press and video productions outside the mainstream (McKay, 1996). Yet media produced outside mainstream power concentrations have rarely received the at-

attention of scholars; media studies has, for the most part, been content to treat the facts of media power as if they were necessities—indeed, natural features on the face of the media landscape.<sup>1</sup>

If media power itself is an increasingly significant theme of social conflict, then media studies should adjust its focus to include not only mainstream productions (major television and radio channels, film majors, the main Web portals, and so on) but also the wider terrain of media production, some of which seeks, explicitly or implicitly, to challenge central concentrations of media resources. This is what we mean by "alternative media" in this book: media production that challenges, at least implicitly, actual concentrations of media power, whatever form those concentrations may take in different locations.

This is not the only definition in use among researchers of nonmainstream media. The one that comes closest to our own is presented in Chris Atton's book *Alternative Media* (2002). John Downing (2001), the leading writer in this neglected field since the 1970s, prefers the term "radical media," as it highlights the role of nonmainstream media in contesting established power blocs with a view to wider social emancipation. A disadvantage of this second definition, however, is that it excludes from its understanding of "alternative media" any media on the right of the political spectrum, even those whose challenge to the concentration of media resources in central institutions is explicit and direct. Clemencia Rodriguez's (2001) concept of "citizens' media" develops Downing's notion of "radical media" in an interesting direction, by making explicit a link with forms of citizenship practice and empowerment, influenced in particular by Latin American theories of empowerment or "concientization" through education and more open communication (see also Rodriguez's chapter in this volume). Citizens' media, in Rodriguez's sense, is in effect a more politicized formulation of our own concept of alternative media; the two definitions are not incompatible. Nonetheless, for our purposes in this book, "alternative media" remains the more flexible *comparative* term, since it involves no judgments about the empowering effects of the media practices analyzed. What we bring together here may or may not be media practice that is politically radical or socially empowering; but in every case, whether indirectly or directly, media power is part of what is at stake.

"Media power" and "alternative media," then, are useful broad terms; they describe a vast range of media production activity, little of it familiar from media studies textbooks yet almost all closely embedded in everyday struggle by communities and individuals. In the final section of this introduction, then, let us explore what wider themes emerge from this complexity, whether as conclusions or as pointers to further research.

## Media Power: A Landscape of Contestation

### THEORIES AND CONTEXTS

The title of part I signals the more theoretical focus of the present chapter as well as chapters 2 and 3. In our use of "theoretical" here, however, we do not refer to the grand theory that "masters" all the empirical details of the later chapters; no such framework is possible yet, or perhaps ever. We mean only to signal that these opening chapters

offer more generalized arguments that open up common questions across a range of local contests.

W. Lance Bennett's chapter on Internet-based global activism starts out from the paradox that corporate media power and concentration seem stronger than ever and the resources of global communication networks available to promote neoliberal discourse are larger than ever. How, then, can it also be true that new media (from mobile phones to digital radio to the Internet and the World Wide Web) are increasingly used by networks that aim to challenge the very same neoliberal discourse—often in spectacular fashion, as at the Seattle meetings of the World Trade Organization? To understand this, we must, Bennett argues, move beyond technological determinism in our accounts of new media and look to the “social, psychological, political, and media contexts” that give new media forms their elective affinity with new forms of protest. Without minimizing the Web's purely technical changes that allow protest groups to replicate across national borders with unprecedented speed, sometimes occupying the very same branded communication space that they are attacking (as with the campaigns against Coca-Cola and Starbucks that Bennett discusses), there must be more involved than technology. The answer, Bennett argues, lies in the cultural dimensions of globalization itself, particularly the globalization of markets and labor: the increasing fluidity and mobility of political identities, within and across national borders; a greater awareness of and engagement with the global scale of problems raised by corporate neoliberalism; and the increasing permeability of media distribution channels themselves to alternative, viral flows that spread countermessages at a speed deriving from the global reach of the very discourses they attack. This cultural and media “subpolitics” of globalization, as Ulrich Beck (2001) calls it, offers a particularly good fit with Internet-enhanced communication space.

In the subsequent chapter, Nick Couldry also seeks to uncover some contextual factors underlying possible new challenges to the concentration of media power. But Couldry is less interested in the successes of certain recent global mediated protests than in practices that contest media power as such. He scans the contemporary scene for signs of a new orientation to media and communication that challenges the traditional idea that these should be concentrated in a narrow sector of society. Here, like Bennett, Couldry foregrounds not technological change in isolation but broader cultural changes in people's thinking about media, specifically challenging the assumption that media production is an activity fundamentally separate from media consumption. Couldry develops two examples: the media philosophy of Matthew Arnison, who was crucial in developing the software on which the global Indymedia news website network relies, and the contrasting market-based philosophy of Paul Eedle, the co-founder of the Web news service “Out There News.” Deciding which innovations will have long-range significance, he argues, is not the main issue at this stage; more important is identifying the factors likely to be crucial in any alternative media practice taking root over the long term.

### THE FRAGILITY OF STATE SUBSIDY

The three chapters in part II pursue this question in relation to an obvious, but also problematic, source of encouragement for challenges to media power: the state. Each

chapter concentrates on a country whose media history has been dominated by state-subsidized media: the U.K., Australia, and Sweden.

Chris Atton offers a sobering assessment of the long-term impact of the U.K. “infoshop” movement, which grew out of earlier state provision for the unemployed but sought to develop a base for political and social activism. Drawing on a rich range of social and political theory (from Alberto Melucci on “new social movements” to public-sphere analysis), Atton analyzes the trajectory of the Autonomous Centre of Edinburgh (ACE) in Scotland, which grew out of the Edinburgh Unemployed Workers' Centre. This originally state-sponsored centre was closed down in the 1990s, and its offshoot had to acquire premises in a poorer district, losing its previous links to local networks. While the new ACE's marginality removed it from direct state surveillance, its lack of resources—other than the “self-exploited” labor of a small group of activists and the proceeds of a small trade in punk music—constrained it from growing. Over the longer term the Centre has been unable to develop into a base for social resistance, neither expanding its membership nor developing a vision that could be communicated to a wider community. Atton's chapter indicates the long-term price that derives not so much from state subsidy itself as from the state's wider influences over socialization and cultural definition.

Christine Morris and Michael Meadows's chapter suggests a much more positive account of state subsidies to media operations among indigenous communities in Australia. But it is a story that offers little encouragement either to traditional top-down models of state media provision or to well-meaning but vacuous market-based notions of the “knowledge economy.” Starting out by acknowledging the importance of communication (in Raymond Williams's sense) as “a central organizing element of Indigenous society,” Morris and Meadows critique earlier ideas of how the state might encourage Indigenous media. Whereas earlier centralized schemes involved little consultation about local needs, the more successful recent developments these authors discuss (often very remote from conurbations) involve networks with a strong community impetus. Such networks respect traditional participatory forms of community management, with “intellectual property” based not on individual possession but on “responsibility and reciprocity.” Underlying these is a new non-market-based concept of “knowledge management” that respects all community members' status as “knowledge workers” and their right to participate in decisions about how a communications infrastructure can be built. This is a positive answer to Bennett's question about the cultural contexts in which information and media technologies connect with social change.

Lennart Weibull's chapter examines one of the most potentially promising sites for state subsidy of the dispersal of media power. In Sweden since the late 1960s, the state has acted to redress what it saw as inherent market pressures toward press concentration. With a weak national press and Social Democratic newspapers particularly prone to market pressures, the Social Democratic government, after much public debate, began subsidizing newspaper delivery and production costs. In the longer term, however, that subsidy system appears not to have worked, failing to prevent the erosion of smaller newspapers because it was not pitched at a high enough level to outweigh market pressures exerted by other newspapers, advertising markets, and the increasing importance of other media as news and entertainment sources. The result, Weibull concludes, has