



Realistic Politics, Uncomfortable Knowledge: Living Creatively with Dissonance

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The media reform movement in the U.S. is of great interest to many of us on the other side of the Atlantic; we follow and support it, with a sense of its profound importance for the U.S. — and the world. At the same time, I'm sure nobody in Europe or elsewhere would underestimate the forces that it is up against. Challenging the configuration of economic interests, its formal and informal political power, established cultural patterns, and ideological currents that hold in place the prevailing system of mainstream media in the U.S. today, is a daunting task. Thus, any and all signs of progress are met with much enthusiasm. The American mainstream media, and the American political and social environment are, of course, unique. On the other hand, the central issues about the concentration of media ownership are obviously global. The situation in Berlusconi-dominated Italy is one of the most flagrant cases among the Western liberal democracies, yet the political consequences of concentrated ownership is a major concern facing all democracies.

Yet formal media concentration is but one aspect of the complex interplay between media and democracy, as the texts by Dan Berger and C. Riley Snorton clearly remind us. In their respective and rather complementary ways, they offer a larger analytical picture, and add to our concrete understanding of this movement and the kinds of issues it is facing. Berger's emphasis is mostly synchronic, looking at the movement's present visions and strategies, while Snorton leans toward a more diachronic approach, lifting out important lessons from history. Taken together, their texts provide an enhanced depth of understanding. Yet, their intentions are not merely to edify: While firmly in support of the general goals of this movement, they both find various shortcomings in the conceptualizations and strategies that the movement is pursuing.

Berger points out that the movement pulls together activists from three disparate backgrounds: media professionals and academics, marginalized social groups, and other interest groups for whom the media are not a key focus, but at times become an important target of political attention. The latter category is highly problematic: he argues that the movement builds on a set of alliances whose composition may seem a bit unsavoury to many people with progressive/left politics. It is an alliance

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where fundamental values, in many cases, are mutually antagonistic. The movement is basically bi-partisan rather than non-partisan, offering no alternatives that reside outside the horizons of the present two-party system. It is also populist in the sense that it makes its appeals to 'the people' generally, rather than to a coherent ideology or set of practices.

Holding hands with right-wing conservative groups may be tactically smart in the short run, but, Berger stresses, it is strategically ill-advised in the long-term. Such groups and interests have different, often opposing ideas even of what democracy is all about. This becomes a major cornerstone of Berger's analysis: the media reform movement's notion of democracy leaves untouched the substantive, normative issues that abound in regard to the inadequacies of contemporary democracy in the U.S. (and elsewhere), issues having to do with political practices, power, rights, and social injustices. Thus, the media reform movement is ignoring the real conservative and even reactionary challenges that many of its allies actually pose to the future of democracy.

Moreover, the movement has crystallized a political thrust that aims at the issues of concentration of media ownership and of Internet neutrality (i.e., access and openness). Berger argues that the movement's exclusive concern with such policy avoids dealing with important areas having to do with culture and power embedded in media practices, routines, and authority, not least in regard to journalism. In short, tackling just the policy field of government and the corporations leaves the prevailing structural constellations and ideological parameters of society intact. For example, no clear connection is developed between media democracy and the larger horizons of social justice.

Snorton, for his part, critically probes the media reform movement's use of history, its view of democracy, and its agenda-setting. His point of departure lies in the notion of 'critical junctures,' as defined by Robert McChesney. The view of history that emerges here ignores long and important black struggles pertinent to our understanding of the evolution of communication, both within the U.S. and elsewhere. Not least the side-stepping of the civil rights period of the 1960s and '70s tends to downplay the significance of the relationship blacks have had with the U.S. government and media system. Snorton points to the black press as an important source for an alternative history about communication practices and governmental policies, and underscores generally the importance of alternative histories that have sought to link struggles for social justice with regard to race, gender, and labor inside the U.S. with critiques of imperialist practices abroad. Highlighting the activism of several key historical figures of radical black internationalism, he admonishes the movement to think beyond the rather two-dimensional notion of cultural imperialism to see how various fissures in today's global complexity may, in fact, help engender and sustain alternative political efforts.

The upshot of Snorton's argument is that racism has remained a festering attribute of American society, a fact that must be included in any and all views about social 'progress.' This becomes apparent, for example, when one encounters the largely enthusiastic political evaluations of the Progressive Era. Snorton reminds us that this period was marked not only by the familiar 'progressive' features highlighted in most histories, but also by the final phase of Reconstruction — with all its dreadful implications for the social oppression and exclusion of blacks in the U.S.. He refers to the exaggeration of racial progress that

emerged around the persona of Martin Luther King, Jr. King symbolizes a 'triumph of democracy' — when, in fact, the social and political situation of blacks in the U.S. have, in many ways, deteriorated in the past several decades.

Berger warns about the movement's allies, while Snorton is criticizes the movement's selective view of history that edits out important and relevant dimensions of black struggles. Both problematize the inadequate view of democracy that the movement operates with; this is important because it becomes a central feature in the platform of the movement, delimiting its possible margins of political maneuverability. The U.S. media reform movement makes rhetorical appeal to a civics book, a Founding Fathers' version of democracy. It confirms the legitimacy of the U.S. political tradition, asserting, among other things, the formal aspects of democracy, i.e., the importance of procedures. This is fine as far as it goes, but the problem is that it ignores all the contemporary dilemmas facing democracy. Berger and Snorton both show that in falling back on this kind of incantation, the movement closes the door on many of the fundamental issues confronting democracy today, both within the U.S. and abroad.

Taken together, these two critical appraisals point, in a compelling manner, to some very serious shortcomings. How should the movement address them? Berger, at the end of his discussion, espouses a media justice approach to insert such perspectives as racial justice and feminist politics into the movement (which tends to be white and male). Often community-based, such approaches promote critiques of prevailing media practices, structures, and ideologies while trying to develop hands-on alternatives. The horizon of media policy is thus linked, in practical terms, to grassroots activism that promotes media literacy and production, with social justice as a dominant thematic. The examples he offers of such efforts is certainly inspiring. Snorton, while on the one hand, arguing for an epistemological renewal where the movement would rethink its views on history and democracy, also puts community in the front seat. He advocates the movement's incorporation of a number of key struggles having to do with social justice, and conceptualizes community not just in traditional local terms, but also in broader thematic terms that can link people together on the national and transnational level.

These are undeniably evocative visions. At the same time, my thoughts turn to notions about politics as 'the art of the possible.' Snorton asks '. . . how different would the media reform movement look if it were focused on issues of social justice, centering on racial justice, feminism, queer liberation, workers' rights, and other concerns as core tenants in a global fight against corporate ownership of the media?' The response that wells up inside me, not without real reluctance, says 'bewildering,' 'marginalized' and 'politically reduced in its efficacy.' I fear that many of the actors who, at present, are engaged in the movement may not even be clear on the exact meaning of all the terminology, but I'm sure that they would not spontaneously express their support. To define the movement in this way would be divisive. It would put many mainstream liberals within the movement in a difficult situation, and ultimately risk paving the way for right-wing conservatives to take command, since the left would now be pushed to the margins by all the venom the right would spew forth.

We all understand that 'democracy' in the world today is relative — even in the most 'democratic' countries it still remains a project that is struggling to be fulfilled. The concept of democracy, no doubt, embodies a mythic dimension: it is our name for the good society, and as such can probably never be fully

attained, yet we must never cease to keep struggling for it. The question becomes at base practical: how best to go about this struggle. In the U.S. context, for the movement, to both confront the corporate control of the media *and* emphasize the shortcomings of the prevailing (slave-owning) Founding Fathers' notion of democracy is ill-advised. It is clearly more strategic — if in other ways less satisfying — to make appeals to some golden era that might unite groups of disparate leanings. Likewise, to introduce race, gender, and sexual tendencies into the discourses of media reform would not only put at risk the support of some important allies, it would also become rhetorically unmanageable, creating too big a package to grasp all at once. Practical politics always at some level involves 'instrumental' dimensions and problematic compromises.

And yet . . . it would be disastrous if the movement refused to acknowledge difficult angles like those that Berger and Snorton take up, since their critiques are crucial for the maintenance of an accurate compass. Even if the movement at present cannot, in practical terms, embody all that they have to say, without having access to such challenging input it could lose its bearings. This recalls the necessity of parallel tracks for serious political work: activist movements, groups and parties need to continually generate relevant knowledge about the world from which strategy can be derived. Much can be and is done internally, and the indefatigable Robert McChesney looms large here. Yet, as we see, outside input is also imperative. Such critical solidarity is important in the life of a movement, offering opportunities for self-reflection. And as circumstances evolve, previously generated knowledge may be activated and incorporated for strategic purposes.

In this relationship, it is important for both the political activists and those intellectuals not involved in immediate strategy that there be an optimal, comfortable distance — that sympathising intellectuals can do their work and offer their critiques in a positive atmosphere without feeling they have to capitulate to the views of the strategists. Snorton mentions Lukács in passing; here was an example of an intellectual who began as a critical, independent thinker and ended up subordinating himself to party orthodoxy — a bad fate for both him and the party. For any movement, to surround itself only with 'yes men' is fatal.

Berger and Snorton introduce some uncomfortable knowledge into the horizons of the media reform movement. This generates dissonance; one can only hope that it will have creative outcomes, if not in the short term, perhaps in that longer view that Berger refers to. And we'll have to keep our fingers crossed that he is not entirely correct in his fear that by then, progressive opportunities may have been eclipsed. In the meantime, there is no reason that the kinds of community-based challenges to media power and social injustice that they both advocate cannot be pursued, and why links to global circumstances cannot be established. Such forms of politics abound on many fronts. Moreover, my own guess is that many such efforts would benefit by enhancing the focus on the media. Likewise, explicitly media-oriented projects are also underway; these too can be further developed. Not all of it need fly the flag of the established media reform movement. Just as some right-wing conservatives are working on many societal fronts while, at the same time, engaging in the media reform, so too should be left active. Gradually, one hopes, links can develop to broaden the movement. In the meantime, there is plenty of work to do, and many banners under which we do it.