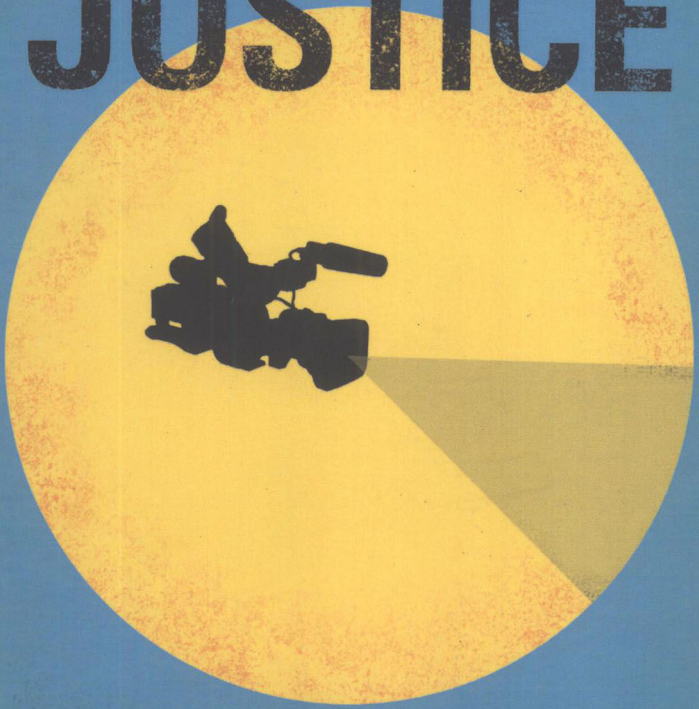
MEDIA AND SOCIAL JUSTICE



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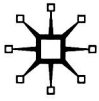

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Sue Curry Jansen

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Critical Communication Theory: New Media, Science, Technology, and Gender, 2002.

Jefferson Pooley

Park, David W., and Jefferson Pooley, eds. *The History of Media and Communication Research: Contested Memories*, 2008.

For James D. Schneider (1939–2005)

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INTRODUCTION

Media, Democracy, Human Rights, and Social Justice

Sue Curry Jansen

Media activism and critical media studies have always addressed social justice issues. Activists work to redress perceived inequities in media access, policies, and representations, while critical media scholars combine teaching, research, and publication with advocacy for democratic media, institutions, and representational practices.

Because most channels for public communication in democratic societies are now dominated by messages produced by commercial media, advertising, and public relations, media activism and critical media studies seek to expand the range and diversity of information, interpretive strategies, and resources available to the public. For example, critical media studies challenge government and market censorship of media and culture; oppose concentrated ownership of media; challenge representational practices that stereotype, marginalize, or "symbolically annihilate" minority views, cultures, groups, or individuals;[1] proactively promote broad access to media resources and media-making skills; encourage development and wide distribution of alternative media; document, publicize, and urge action to counter domestic and global digital divides; use media technologies to expose abuses of power; and develop and promote policy positions to advance social justice.

Critical media researchers pioneered efforts to document and challenge the roles media play in facilitating and rationalizing global inequalities in the distribution of power relations and resources. Many critical media scholars were, for example, advocates of the New World Information Order: the movement, sponsored by the nonaligned nations in the United Nations in the 1970s and early 1980s that promoted a more equitable distribution of global information resources.[2] Some media scholars advocate for recognition of "the right to communicate" as a fundamental human right.[3] Critical media scholarship and

activism also operate at local levels in community media projects; these may, for example, involve instruction in media literacy and production with the objective of providing underresourced people with the communication skills and technologies that they need to tell their own stories and stake their own claims for social justice.

Yet critical media scholarship has remained marginal to the interdisciplinary academic field formally designated as social justice studies; social justice studies, in turn, frequently lack adequate theories of media and communication. Greater mutual exposure can enrich both approaches. For example, in his recent, magisterial statement of his comparative theory of justice, *The Idea of Justice*, economist Amartya Sen sees the removal of barriers to free and open discussion, the development of the right ("capability") to communicate, and the institutionalization of an "unrestrained and healthy media" (to give "voice to the neglected and disadvantaged") as essential prerequisites to the pursuit of human justice and security.[4] Despite this foundational claim, even Sen does not offer a theory of media and devotes only three pages directly to the topic. Clearly, both social justice scholarship and activism and critical media scholarship and activism can benefit from greater mutual exposure.

We do not pretend to offer a synthesis of the two areas of inquiry. Our objective is more modest: to offer a provocative collection of essays, which we believe can be useful in starting a long-overdue conversation between the two fields.

Social Justice Scholarship and Activism

Social justice scholarship is, by definition, interdisciplinary and practice oriented, combining academic research and pedagogies with efforts to improve the life chances of marginalized people, communities, and causes. Its intellectual powers are amplified by drawing on the combined knowledge resources of multiple disciplinary lenses; its effectiveness as practice is frequently enhanced by developing applied aspects of this knowledge in partnerships with diverse coalitions of concerned parties.

Whether motivated by intellectual conviction, civic responsibility, ethical imperatives, religious ardor, or loyalty to kin or kind, social justice scholarship shares a common value system rooted in empathy. This value orientation is expressed in the relationship the researcher establishes with the people or practices she studies. At the turn of the twentieth century, the German sociologist Max Weber described that relationship as *verstehen* or sympathetic understanding.[5] More recently and much more expansively, feminists have framed the relationship in moral terms as practicing an "ethics of care."[6] Martin Luther King Jr.'s concept of "the beloved community," which functioned both as a hopeful vision for the future and as a description of an interactional ideal among

civil rights activists, takes this ethic out of the academy (and gospel) and into the streets.[7]

Maintaining sympathetic understanding and putting an ethics of care into practice requires activists and scholars to engage in ongoing reflection about the challenges, responsibilities, relationships, and processes involved in representing the lives of others.[8] The scholar must surrender the hubris of the expert and, in so far as possible, become an empathetic partner in the work of the communities and projects she or he seeks to advance while, at the same time, remaining constantly alert to the fragile character of these partnerships. Partnerships formed with and on behalf of marginalized people, cultures, or causes produce moral, ethical, and methodological tensions that require social justice scholars to, in the words of social documentarian Robert Coles, continuously "interrogate" their own "locations": the dispositions, motivations, and expectations they bring to their inquiries and activism as well as the obligations they incur to the people they advocate for and study.[9] These partnerships also require recognition that some boundaries between people may be impermeable and that good intentions do not necessarily produce good outcomes. In short, social justice scholarship and activism can be a risky business. Moreover, its overt value commitments, in contrast to the less visible, naturalized value commitments of dominant research paradigms, makes social justice scholarship a ready target of opportunity for hostile critics of the approach.[10]

Social justice studies, as presently constituted, grew out of the social movements of the 1960s. In the United States, they were extensions of social activism, especially the civil rights movement, the war on poverty, the peace movement, the women's movement(s), as well as broader movements against cultural imperialism and for human rights and global justice. Initial academic arguments for social justice studies were grounded in negation: critiques of claims to value neutrality by the social sciences and analytic philosophy that exposed the unrecognized race, gender, and class biases of established paradigms within academic disciplines and applied forms of expertise.

Social justice scholarship generally embraces the "new history," which recognizes that knowledge is socially constructed and value oriented. The new history seeks to expand the range of knowledge into areas previously neglected or underrepresented by traditional academic disciplines. That is, its mission has been to discover and recover repressed voices and ideas from the past, as well as to create and legitimate opportunities for the views of underresourced peoples and perspectives to be expressed, disseminated, and heard. Realizing this mission usually requires openness to alternative pedagogical approaches, which decenter authority, including feminist approaches and pedagogies that draw on or are inspired by Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.[11]

The appearance of John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* in 1971 and the many critiques and refinements it inspired served as a second impetus to the development of social justice studies. The most influential philosopher of the second half of the twentieth century, Rawls affirmed the centrality of justice studies to political philosophy, moral theory, law, and public policy. His philosophy of justice as "fairness" established that the capacity to develop a moral character is a sufficient condition to be entitled to equal justice, and, in turn, his theory provided criteria for assessing the failures of contemporary democratic institutions and nation states to achieve justice.[12]

Several international developments added further impetus to social justice scholarship and activism, including the dismantling of European colonial empires after World War II; the emergence of postcolonial art and literature and critical postcolonial studies; the failure of modernization theory, which dominated development policy in the postwar era; the proliferation of international nongovernmental organizations working for (and against) various causes, including social justice; and the emergence of a global feminist movement and its formal recognition, albeit often without requisite support, by international organizations like the United Nations and the European Union. The end of the Cold War and the subsequent global integration of the world economy, which some critics see as modernization theory reconstituted for a new century, also spawned counterglobalization activism, most notably the 1999 protest against the World Trade Organization in Seattle and Naomi Klein's *No Logo* manifesto.[13]

Less dramatically, but more consistently, social justice commitments and values have for decades guided the international work of various religious groups like the Maryknoll Lay Missionaries, who work to provide basic needs to the poor in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. These varied developments, movements, and forms of activism energized fresh forms of thinking about international social justice. Indigenous groups, movements, writers, scholars, and activists effectively rejected Eurocentric intellectual hegemony. Sen, for example, consistently draws on non-Western, especially Indian, perspectives in developing his theory of social justice; however, it must be emphasized that he does so without rejecting essential Western contributions to the development of freedom of expression. In doing so, Sen avoids the trap of identity politics and develops a cosmopolitan approach that is deeply committed to alleviating human suffering and ameliorating global injustices.

Because of the interdisciplinary character of social justice studies, its varied currents generally flow in similar directions rather than flowing together. With some exceptions, overlap is most directly apparent in footnotes, bibliographies, and anthologies. What the various currents have in common is a shared concern for identifying and ameliorating those social forces and structures that

systematically undermine the life chances and human dignity of some groups or individuals while creating unfair advantages for others.

Deeper Roots of Social Justice Advocacy

Yet the roots of intellectual advocacy for social justice as well as its links to higher education actually run much deeper in North America than this account of the emergence of social justice studies since the 1960s suggests. The Society of Friends (the Quakers) and the Mennonites protested against America's "original sin" of slavery as early as 1688; however, organized efforts to rally public opinion against slavery did not emerge until the 1830s. Using the "mass" media of the day, the abolition movement established a template for social movements in America; it also served as a springboard for the women's suffrage and temperance movements.

Although it is largely forgotten today, the religious "moral awakening" that provided much of the momentum for abolition also inspired educational fervor. This educational awakening led to the founding of colleges in the newly settled states in the Midwest prior to the Civil War to advance learning and spread the gospel, and in some cases the social gospel, to African Americans, women, American Indians, and the poor.[14] Many of these colleges later abandoned their fervor for social justice but residues of these early visions can sometimes still be found in their mission statements. In the late nineteenth century, the social gospel movement—the social reformist efforts of liberal Protestant sects that sought to improve life on earth as opposed to promising the disadvantaged that they would reap their rewards in heaven—expanded its agendas to redress broader social and economic injustices. The social gospel movement also played significant roles in the development of the social sciences in America, especially sociology and historical economics.[15]

Concepts of labor justice emerged in the 1840s in France and England, contesting "wage slavery." The injustices of unequal relations between owners of capital and workers, and the distribution of income and wealth within emerging capitalist institutions, were called into question by communists, socialists, and social democrats, as well as by many religious leaders who also questioned the increasing role that materialism, money, and market relations played in people's lives. The trade union movement was a response to these concerns: seeking to reverse growing concentrations of wealth and power whether by revolution or reform.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, muckraking journalism applied the journalistic imperative to "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable"—sometimes with more ardor than accuracy. Muckrakers sensationalized the social ills that capitalism and modern urban life spawned by

exposing threats to public health resulting from unsanitary food processing, exploitation of child labor, dangerous working conditions, urban corruption, and the criminal practices of the "robber barons" of the Gilded Age.

Global struggles for social justice and human rights gained public visibility internationally in the years after World War II, in struggles against colonialism and neocolonialism. These struggles are ongoing, as many of the industrial ills that plagued the United States a century ago have been exported to the developing world, where wages are very low, and unions and government regulation of workplace safety nonexistent. Issues of environmental justice, including global warming, are also, by definition, international struggles.

In all of these movements, media and communication—books, newspapers, leaflets, speeches, sermons, manifestos, slogans, and, more recently, electronic media (Internet, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter)—have played crucial roles in organizing social justice movements and rallying mass support for social change. Media exposure is an essential constituent of all successful social movements; in the United States, for example, muckraking and the progressive reaction to it resulted in antitrust legislation, workplace regulations, food safety inspections, and social welfare programs. Media coverage can also, of course, undermine as well as advance social movements.

In reaction to the successes of campaigns for social reform, corporations organized trade organizations like the National Association of Manufacturers to lobby on behalf of their interests. The public relations industry was born to manage public perceptions of corporations and to frame public issues and legislative agendas in ways that advance corporate interests. By the late twentieth century, media institutions and practices had become so central to the operations of global capitalism that debates about media control, access, policy, law, and representational powers are now primary sites of struggles for social justice.

Media Justice: A Gateway Issue

In what has been called the "New Gilded Age," escalating inequalities in income and access to basic resources—adequate nutrition, shelter, health care, basic education, and a living wage—are now at levels that have not been seen in the United States since before the Great Depression.[16] For example, a recent study shows that the United States ranks forty-second globally, behind Cuba and Malaysia, in mortality rates for children under five; as recently as 1990, the United States had ranked twenty-ninth, which was still a very poor showing for the world's largest economy.[17] The life expectancy gap between rich and poor Americans expanded in recent decades.[18] The "life chances" of children born in the poorest countries of the world have also declined dramatically in the last 30

years.[19] Yet with a few significant exceptions, mainstream and corporate media ignore the new social inequality.[20]

Social justice scholars correctly argue that we need a theory (or theories) of social justice.[21] But unless social justice theorists incorporate adequate understanding of the role that media and communication play in struggles for social justice, their theories will neither possess sufficient explanatory power to advocate successfully for the causes they seek to advance nor be able to explain the potent but often hidden forms of resistance that undermine their efforts. As former US Federal Communications Commission (FCC) commissioner Nicholas Johnson points out, regardless of what your primary area of social advocacy may be, media reform has to be your secondary issue.[22] Without a free, open, diverse, and robust media, democratic social change is virtually impossible.

In his 2007 *Communication Revolution*, Robert W. McChesney strongly affirms Johnson's claim, but he also pushes the argument for critical media scholarship and activism a step further. Drawing on his experience with the media reform group Free Press, McChesney points out that media reform can be a "gateway issue": a first issue that can draw new people into public life, citizen activism, and wider struggles for social justice. Further, he contends—and we heartily agree—that the "fates of media reform and social justice research are intertwined. They will rise or fall together."[23]

Framing Media Activism

Recent efforts to make media reform a first issue and to mobilize media activism into a viable social movement have had limited success in the United States.[24] The use of the Internet as an organizing and mobilizing tool is transforming how social movements are constituted and defined. Online organizing by groups like Free Press in the United States has, for example, been successful in mobilizing the support of millions to petition Congress and the FCC in opposition to policies that would have allowed further concentrations of media ownership. Activism on behalf of net neutrality has attracted support on a similar scale.

In *Remaking Media* (2006), Robert Hackett and William Carroll identify a number of framing devices that have been used in attempts to capture the diverse energies, priorities, issues, and commitments of media activists, including (1) free press and freedom of expression, a frame that implicitly draws on the values of the First Amendment and emphasizes the values of mainstream political liberalism; (2) media democratization, a frame that highlights democracy's deficits and emphasizes participatory democracy, the role of informed citizens, and the responsibility of the press to serve the public interest; (3) the right to communication frame, which emphasizes the importance of communication in relation to other human rights and is most often invoked by activists

working in international contexts; (4) the cultural environmental frame, which borrows its trope from the environmental movement and targets toxic cultural fare by opposing the global homogenization of commercial media and market censorship and by advocating for fairness, gender equity, diversity, and democratic decision making in media ownership, employment, and representation; and, finally (5) media justice, which is relatively new and has special resonance in the United States and among minorities. According to Hackett and Carroll, "This frame re-positions the project as one of social justice in a world organized around global capitalism, racism and patriarchy, and directly connotes the need for alliances, even integration, with other social movements."[25] The justice frame is synthetic and inclusive, not only broadly encompassing the concerns of the other frames, but also very intentionally linking to and drawing on historical struggles for social justice and civil rights, including struggles for racial, class, gender, and sexual justice.[26]

In an comprehensive 2007 review of the literature on media activism, Philip Napoli points out that the multiplicity of frames reflect not only the broad range of issues that motivate participants as well as the movement's international reach but also the lack of consensus within the movement.[27] Frames matter. They create collective identities, mobilize, and focus the energies of participants in social movements. Criticism within various factions of the movement voiced dissatisfaction with early framing efforts, claiming they fostered parochialism and misunderstanding. For example, in developing countries, some international media activists view democracy as a loaded word: it can be "a Trojan Horse for capitalist imperialism," according to Aliza Dichter of the Center for International Media Action.[28] Moreover, Hackett points out that within media-policy discourse, market liberals interpret media "democratization" as deregulation and privatization of media.[29] Napoli contends that the media justice frame has developed in response to a general dissatisfaction with more established frames and that the term "justice" is deliberately chosen to link media advocacy to wider struggles for justice and social inclusion.[30]

Our emphasis on the qualifier *social* in social justice is intended to signal solidarity with primary struggles for the creation of *social institutions* that promote human equality, dignity, and fairness. That is, we see media transformation as a necessary, but far from sufficient, condition for creating a just society.

The Social Justice Frame

In embracing the social justice frame for media advocacy, we are not, collectively or individually, endorsing every cause that adopts or co-opts that banner, although we do endorse free and fair access to communicative opportunities for all, in the spirit, though not the letter, of Jürgen Habermas's valiant attempt to

articulate ideal standards for democratic communications.[31] We posit no exclusive claims in framing media advocacy within a social justice frame, nor do we recognize or seek to impose any tests of ideological purity on those who may share it. Too often media reform coalitions have been fractured by internal ideological divisions. While divergent views do need to receive fair hearings, coalitions are always fragile and, by definition, sites of limited agreements: strategic goals need to be kept in sight.

Academic study of social justice and media reform are relatively recent developments. In contrast, activists have a long history of involvement in struggles for media justice in the United States. The activism of the Office of Communication of the United Church of Christ (UCC) in the 1960s is generally regarded as the benchmark for the beginning of the contemporary media reform movement.[32] Martin Luther King Jr., in a meeting with one of his Northern supporters, Everett Parker (founder of the UCC's Office of Communication), complained that television stations in the South were not covering the civil rights movement or news of the African American community more generally. In 1963, the UCC petitioned the FCC to revoke the license of WBLT in Jackson, Mississippi, for failing to serve the public interest of its audience, which was about 50 percent African American. The FCC denied the petition, claiming that only companies, not the public, could challenge a license. The UCC took the case to the US Court of Appeals, which found in its favor, establishing the precedent that allows members of the public, either groups or individuals, to petition and hold standing before the FCC and other regulatory agencies. This ruling was crucial to the future of critical media activism addressing broadcasting practices in the United States.

Robert Horwitz sees the UCC effort as a revival of the broadcast reform movement of the 1930s, in which media reformers argued that commercialization of broadcasting runs counter to the spirit and values of a democratic society, and advocated, unsuccessfully, for a nonprofit and noncommercial broadcasting infrastructure in the United States; McChesney has written the definitive history of that struggle.[33] Other scholars have located much earlier precedents for media justice activism. Dan Schiller identified efforts as early as 1894–1919 by trade unions, civic reformers, and academics directed at the development of telephone service infrastructure, calling for universal service and municipal ownership.[34] In my own work, I have uncovered resistance to the emergence of the public relations industry in the early twentieth century by such notables as John Dewey, Walter Lippmann, Upton Sinclair, and Senator Robert LaFollette Jr.[35] Organized labor's advocacy on behalf of "listeners' rights" in the post–World War II era has been chronicled by Elizabeth Fones-Wolf.[36] There are undoubtedly other initiatives that await historical recovery.