

Public Interest Media Activism and Advocacy as a Social Movement:

A Review of the Literature

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Note:

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### **Abstract**

This report examines the academic literature focused on public interest media and communications activism and advocacy within the U.S. and abroad (labeled, in the name of brevity, the “media reform” movement throughout this report).

This report first seeks to outline the parameters of the movement under consideration, in terms of the primary conceptual frames employed, outcomes pursued, and strategic approaches. As this section illustrates, the media reform movement is characterized by a diverse array of conceptual frames (ranging from “media reform” to “media justice” to “communication rights” to “media democracy”), and a hesitancy at this point to coalesce around a single unifying frame. The movement is similarly diverse in terms of its outcome priorities and in terms of the strategic approaches employed by its various member organizations.

The second section of the report charts the origins and evolution of the research in this field. As this section illustrates, over time the analytical approach that scholars have brought to the topic increasingly has adopted a social movement theory perspective.

The third section considers the media reform movement as a social movement, identifying key recurring themes in the literature related to the interaction between media reform and other social movements, to the relationship between social movements and the media, and to the organization and performance of the organizations driving the media reform movement. As this section illustrates, media reform is unique in the extent to which its goals can facilitate the success of other social movements, but also is uniquely hampered by the extent to which traditional mainstream media are motivated to deny press coverage to media reform. This section also highlights some of the most common critiques leveled at the media reform movement, ranging from a lack of coordination and collaboration between groups, to a lack of a strong nation-wide constituency, to a primarily reactive orientation toward policy issues.

The concluding section summarizes the key findings of the report and offers a series of recommendations related to strategic approaches for the movement and to avenues for future research.

## Key Findings

- The academic literature on the media reform movement is much more extensive than has previously been suggested, due in large part to tremendous growth in the literature in recent years, as well as due to the diverse terminology used to describe the movement (which can confound efforts to assemble an appropriately inclusive body of literature).
- A significant proportion of the literature is internally generated (i.e., produced by individuals involved in the movement).
- The tendency among scholars to conceptualize media reform as a social movement has become more common in recent years.
- The media reform movement frequently has been characterized as unique due to the extent to which the ends of the movement support key means by which other social movements achieve their goals.
- The media reform movement frequently has been characterized as subservient to broader social movements, given its tight linkages throughout its history to social movements such as civil rights, yet evidence of strong and systematic linkages between media reform and other social movements has been lacking.
- The media reform movement frequently has been characterized as highly fragmented, lacking substantial inter-group coordination, and lacking a sufficiently large constituency.
- The media reform movement frequently has been characterized as reaching its peak in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but also becoming highly rejuvenated within the past decade, in terms of public interest organization activity, citizen interest, and funding support.

## Recommendations

- Although the media reform movement reached its zenith as an outgrowth of the civil rights movement, the absence of evidence of a long-term, systematic, and mutually beneficial relationship between media reform and civil rights, as well as the increased prominence of media and communications institutions and technologies to contemporary political, cultural, and economic life, raise questions about the appropriateness of perpetuating strategic approaches that place media reform as subservient to other social movements.
- The consistent finding that, throughout the media reform movement's history, it has been a highly fragmented and decentralized movement highlights the need for the development of strategic approaches that seek to capitalize on this fragmentation, rather than eliminate it, as the persistence of this characteristic may suggest a certain intractability.
- Future research needs to engage in long-term assessments of media reform issues and organizations in an effort to track over time the factors that can contribute to the long-term success of the movement.
- Future research needs to focus on the under-studied issues and time periods in the history of the movement, such as telecommunications services and ownership and cable regulation.
- Future research needs to develop thorough and rigorous indicators of success or institutional change achieved by the media reform movement in order to facilitate objective assessments of the movement's impact.

## **Public Interest Media Activism and Advocacy as a Social Movement: A Review of the Literature**

### **Introduction**

Recent years have seen a dramatic increase in citizen awareness of – and concern for – issues in the media and communications policy arena. Issues ranging from ownership regulation to access to communications technologies to the development of community media now resonate far beyond the policymaking sector. Many observers have associated this phenomenon with the growth of public interest organization activism in these areas – growth that has taken place along such lines and that has had such influence that the field increasingly is being characterized as a legitimate social movement (e.g., Atton, 2003; Calabrese, 2004; Hackett & Adam, 1999; Hackett & Carroll, 2006; Howley, 2004; Mueller, Page, & Kuerbis, 2004; Noriega, 2000; O’Siochru, 1999; Schiller, 1999; Thomas, 2006; White, 1995). Others have documented tremendous growth in recent years in policymaking activity in the communications policy area (see Mueller, Kuerbis, & Page, 2004), which may both reflect and encourage citizen interest and public interest activity. In any case, the growing profile of activism and advocacy work in the media and communications policy area underscores the need for scholarship that examines these activities, that places them into broader historical and theoretical contexts, and that assesses the structure and behavior of the organizations engaged in these activities.

This paper is an effort to assess and synthesize the scholarly literature to date that has addressed these issues. The goals of this paper are to provide a roadmap of the scholarship examining citizen and public interest advocacy in media and communications policy in terms of its primary points of origins and theoretical perspectives; as well as to synthesize the key findings of this literature as they relate to the strategies employed by actors in this area and to our understanding of these activities as representative of a larger social movement.

It is important to emphasize that this paper does not seek to provide a detailed history of this movement, though certainly discussions of key historical moments and figures will take place in the course of addressing the paper's main areas of emphasis. Detailed historical accounts of the movement and its key figures can be found elsewhere (e.g., Classen, 2004; Fratkin, 2002; Korn, 1991; Horwitz, 1997; McChesney, 1993; Mills, 2004; Schiller, 1999; Toro, 2000). Indeed, if there are (and there are) critical events, organizations, or time periods related to media and communications policy activism and advocacy that do not receive detailed discussion in this review, this does not reflect the author's judgment regarding their importance (or lack thereof) to media policymaking or to the movement; rather, it reflects the fact that these events, organizations, or time periods have, for any number of possible reasons, not yet generated attention from academic researchers. Indeed, the identification of such possible gaps is a key motivating factor behind this review. The identification of such gaps – and the possible reasons for their existence – will be discussed in the concluding section of this paper.

### **A Note on the Search Methodology**

In locating and compiling the academic literature on public interest advocacy and activism in media and communications policy, a key strategic objective was to cast a deliberately wide net, in terms of how the field is defined, in terms of the academic disciplines/fields of interest and in terms of geographical reach. It should be noted, however, to the extent that this review is limited to English language publications, it is far less comprehensive in its review of scholarship related to international manifestations of public interest advocacy and activism in the media and communications sector it is in terms of the U.S.

The review also sought to be inclusive in terms of its technological orientation. Traditional mass media, telecommunications, and the Internet all have been incorporated under

the umbrella framework employed for this review; though, as will also become clear, scholarly attention to public interest advocacy and activism activities and organizations has tended to focus on mass media (particularly broadcasting) and (more recently) the Internet, with less attention to telecommunications-specific areas such as telephony (for exceptions, see Rhodes, 2006; Schiller, 1999, 2007).<sup>1</sup>

The search strategy for this literature review included disciplinary databases of the academic literature across a wide range of disciplines, including law, communication/media studies, sociology, history, political science, public policy, and cultural studies. Search terms employed included “media reform,” “media democracy/democratization,” “media justice,” “communication rights,” “telecommunications reform,” as well as the use of the terms “media” and “telecommunications” in conjunction with terms including “public interest,” “advocacy,” and “activism.” The bibliographies of those studies located via these search terms were then scanned to identify additional items of relevance that may not have been located using these various search terms.<sup>2</sup> This review not only sought to include books, book chapters, and academic journal articles, but also as much of the more elusive “grey literature” (i.e., conference papers, reports issued by non-profits and advocacy organizations, dissertations, and theses) as could be located.

The scope of this paper does not, however, encompass the related, though distinct, area of activity typically referred to as media development, which primarily involves efforts to reformulate media institutions and practices in developing or transitional nations. Although such work is guided by many of the same principles and objectives as public interest media advocacy and activism (see Fox, 1986; Kumar, 2006; Milton, 2001), it is a sufficiently distinct and

extensive undertaking in its own right (with its own substantial body of literature) to best be defined as beyond the scope of the current analysis.

### **Summary of the State of the Literature on Public Interest Media Activism and Advocacy**

According to some assessments, the state of knowledge on public interest media advocacy and activism has been lacking (see, e.g., Thomas, 2006). As Mueller, Page, and Kuerbis (2004) recently noted, while the literature on social movements has paid substantial attention to the role of information technologies in the enabling of activism, “almost none of this literature looks at communications and information policy as object of activism” (p. 170). Such characterizations may overstate the case somewhat (as this review will illustrate) for a number of possible reasons. The first reason may be these authors’ focus on literature that examines this movement *specifically* through the lens of social movement theory. As this review will indicate, the application of this analytical approach to this area is a relatively recent phenomenon, with earlier analyses more often grounded in theories of regulatory decision-making or the policymaking process, or, being primarily historical narratives lacking in a particular theoretical grounding.

Second, as will also become clear, this movement has operated under many guises, and with a wide array of labels, particularly when the scope of the analysis is global in nature. And while it is the case that those within the movement (or one of its associated sectors) have undeniably legitimate and compelling reasons for the adherence to one particular terminology over another (i.e., media reform vs. media justice, vs. media democracy, vs. communication rights, etc.), this review of the literature has cast a wide net with the goal of developing a broad-based account of the accumulated knowledge in this area. This approach mirrors that of other recent studies, which have incorporated all of the relevant subcomponents of the movement (e.g.,



media reform, media justice, media democracy) into a single analytical frame (see Hackett & Carroll, 2006; Listening Project, 2004; Surveying the Capacity to Succeed, 2006).

Consequently, this review is only secondarily concerned with parsing out the different contours of the media reform movement versus the media justice movement or the communication rights movement. This set of priorities reflects the notion that even those within these different movement sectors would likely acknowledge that the movement for the improvement of the media and communications system, no matter how it is defined or the specific priorities articulated, can be usefully studied as a somewhat integrated whole. As Opel (2004) notes, “Regardless of the term . . . all refer to a large umbrella of issues and organizations addressing the role of the media in the modern world” (p. 25; see also Klein, 2001).

For the sake of brevity, a single referent needs to be employed throughout the remainder of this paper, and the term *media reform* has been selected. This term has been selected in full recognition of its inadequacies in terms of capturing the full range of concerns that characterize the citizens’ groups and public interest organizations concerned with improving the performance of media systems and the formulation of media and communications policy, but also out of a desire to not muddy the waters further by the introduction of a new effort at a sufficiently all-encompassing term. Indeed, these issues of terminology will be discussed in detail below. Among the various terminologies currently employed, however, the term media reform is likely the most widely used, and for that reason alone it is being used as the designated shorthand for what is inarguably a more complex and multi-faceted movement than the traditional definition of media reform encapsulates.

A final reason for this paper’s departure from earlier assessments of the state of research in this area is the very recent growth in the academic literature exploring the media reform

movement. Just the past three years have seen the publication of at least ten *book-length* treatments of this topic (Classen, 2004; Fones-Wolf, 2006b; Hackett & Carroll, 2006; Klinenberg, 2007; McChesney, 2004; McChesney, Newman, & Scott, 2005; Mills, 2004; Opel, 2004; Rhodes, 2006; Stole, 2007), in addition to a host of journal articles and book chapters across a variety of disciplines, including sociology (Brinson, 2006; Klinenberg, 2004), communications (Carroll & Hackett, 2006; Pickard, 2006; Raboy, 2004; Thomas, 2006), cultural studies (Calabrese, 2004; O'Siochru, 2004; Stengrim, 2005; Wible, 2004), and history (Fones-Wolf, 2006a; Mason, 2006; Pike & Winseck, 2004).

### **Organization of the Report**

Thus, it is an extensive, varied, and highly inter-disciplinary body of literature that is the focus of this analysis. The rest of the paper is structured as follows. The first section outlines the scope of the literature under review via a discussion of the issue of the different terminologies, and the associated different definitions and areas of emphasis that characterize what is being (inadequately) labeled here the “media reform” movement. This section considers both domestic and international manifestations of the movement.<sup>3</sup> The second section offers a roadmap of the evolution of this area of research, considering the theoretical perspectives that have been employed over the years, as well as the key points of origin for this research. As this section will illustrate, the evolution of research on the media reform movement has in many ways mirrored the movement itself in that early research was heavily legally oriented, but gradually branched out into other social sciences (particularly those interested in the dynamics of the policymaking process), and, most recently, has drawn quite heavily from existing theory and research related to social movements. The third section attempts to synthesize the key findings of this literature, with a particular focus on those findings related to how social movement theory helps us to

understand key structural and organizational characteristics of the movement, the strategies it employs, and its overall effectiveness in creating institutional change. The concluding section summarizes the paper's key findings and offers suggestions for further research.

### **Defining a Fragmented Movement: From Media Reform to Media Justice to Media Democracy and Beyond**

For a social movement that has been characterized as relatively small and even (at times) ineffectual (see Mueller, Page, & Kuerbis, 2004a, 2004b; Rowland, 1982), the media reform movement has sustained several distinct, though tightly inter-related, sectors of activity throughout its history. Often these sectors all are operating simultaneously, though there also has occurred a rising and falling of particular sectors over time (see Mueller, Page, & Kuerbis, 2004). Certain sectors, such as those revolving around the notion of a New World Information and Communication Order (see Galtung & Vincent, 1992; Roach, 1990; Traber & Nordenstreng, 1992) and the Cultural Environment Movement (see Duncan, 1999) have largely come and gone (Carlsson, 2003; Hackett & Carroll, 2004),<sup>4</sup> though to be replaced by sectors and organizations that maintain some of the same policy priorities and rhetorical approaches, but that also reflect changes in the broader technological and policymaking environment. In the most thorough study to date of the organizational ecology of the media reform field, Mueller, Kuerbis, & Page (2004) illustrate how the number of public interest advocacy organizations involved in communication and information policy issues grew rapidly through the 1960s and 1970s, diminished in the 1980s, and experienced a resurgence in the 1990s. These authors also note that the more recently founded public interest advocacy organizations have focused less on issues of media content and more on issues of individual rights and economics – a reflection of the nature of the core policy issues surrounding the Internet, which these authors see as a key driver of the recent growth of

public interest and advocacy organizations in the information and communications policy area (Mueller, Kuerbis, & Page, 2004).

The media reform movement is hardly monolithic. Rather, it is comprised of a diverse and dynamic array of sub-sectors that overlap significantly in their motivations and guiding principles, but that also maintain distinct identities. These various components of the media reform movement distinguish themselves from one another across a number of criteria, including their framing of the issues, their policy priorities, and their key strategic activities. It is important to address these issues at the outset in order to establish the frame of reference for this analysis.

### **Framing**

Looking first at framing, Hackett and Carroll (2006) outline the primary frames that have characterized media and communications activism over the years and across the globe. These frames include: a) a *free press, freedom of expression* frame, which emphasizes First Amendment values, but also encroachment on such values from both government and corporate sources (e.g., Heinz & Beckles, 2005); b) a *media democratization* frame, which emphasizes an informed citizenry and effective self-governance, and the role and responsibilities of the media in relation to these objectives (see Hackett & Adam, 1999; McChesney & Nichols, 2005); c) a *right to communicate* frame, which emphasizes the connection between communication and other human rights, most frequently at the global level (see Birdsall, 2006; Brinson, 2006; Calabrese, 2004; Costanza-Chock, 2002; McCiver, Birdsall, & Rasmussen, 2004; Raboy, 2004; Thomas, 2005, 2006); d) a *cultural environment* frame that seeks to make strong parallels between media activism and environmental activism via an emphasis on harmful or distasteful media content (see, e.g., Duncan, 1999);<sup>5</sup> and e) a *media justice* frame, which is relatively new in its explicit

articulation, but draws upon many of the civil rights values and concerns with minority representation and participation in the media and the marginalization of various sectors of society that characterized early media activism in the U.S. (see Cyril, 2005; Davis & the Applied Research Center, n.d.; Rubin, 2002).

The existence of these many frames is in part a reflection of the wide range of concerns that characterize participants in this movement, as well as the movement's international scope (O'Siochru, 2005).<sup>6</sup> This diversity of frames also is a reflection of a distinct lack of consensus in terms of the most appropriate means of framing the broader movement to the general public. That is, some sectors of the movement find particular framing approaches unacceptable for a variety of reasons. For instance, some sectors of the movement find heavy reliance on "democracy" as a core principle problematic, particularly in international contexts where the term democracy has developed strong negative affiliations with perceived associated processes of commercialization and cultural imperialism (Rubin, 2002). Others see the democracy frame as inherently ambiguous and lacking in the necessary specificity to achieve widespread appeal and identification (see Belden, Russonello, & Stewart, 2006; Hackett & Carroll, 2006). More specifically, Hackett (2000) notes that, for market liberals, media democratization means private ownership of media, protection from government censorship, and the removal of government-imposed public-interest regulations. Obviously such an interpretation of the term runs directly counter to the principles of virtually all sectors of the media reform movement, which undermines the utility of media democratization as a focal concept in the minds of many movement participants.

The communication rights frame, which seeks to place communication within a comprehensive human rights framework (see McIver, et al., 2002), has undergone similar

criticism. Some within the movement see the communication rights frame as too abstract and unable to connect concretely with citizens' day-to-day concerns and needs (O'Siochru, 2005). Others see it as being too legalistic in its orientation (Hackett & Carroll, 2006).

The media justice frame, in particular, has arisen in response to a general dissatisfaction with many of the more established frames (Dichter, 2004; Rubin, 2002). As research directed at members of the media justice community has noted:

The terms "media democracy," "media advocacy," and "media reform" also are used by those who struggle for progressive change in media policy. Although some feel that the distinction between these terms is largely semantic, whether one chooses "media democracy" rather than "media justice" to describe their work actually reveals a significant political divide. This divide occurs in part on the basis of race and age – groups run by younger staff, often of color, have consciously developed their media activism through a justice lens. . . . they see the term 'media justice' as deliberately addressing issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality within the broad field of media" (Davis & Applied Research Center, n.d., pp. 17-18).

The media reform frame can be interpreted as too narrow to encompass efforts such as the development of alternative media – given the "reform" terminology's potential for being interpreted exclusively in terms of changing existing media structures rather than promoting the development of alternative media structures (see, e.g., Opel, 2004; Powers, 2005), which, as is discussed below, very much has been – and continues to be – part of the broader movement under consideration here.

Thus, it should be fairly clear at this point that members of the media reform movement often perceive significant differences between themselves and those who are part of what can, at

least superficially, be considered allied groups (see *Surveying the Capacity to Succeed*, 2006) when it comes to the key guiding frame for the movement (though, as the discussion above suggests, these differences also can run deeper than mere framing). Hackett and Carrol (2004) suggest that the construction of an agreed-upon collective identity may be more difficult for media reformers than for members of other social movements because the identity of “media reformer” is not as deeply held or resonant an identity as those associated with other social movements (e.g., environmentalism).

Nonetheless, the potential importance of reconciling these varied approaches to the field is reflected in recent research conducted for the Ford Foundation that asked members of different sectors of the movement to offer their perceptions of the connotations of different terminologies. Media justice, for instance, was found not only to reflect the priorities outlined above, but also to reflect an intentional opposition to the more traditional media reform sector, which has been perceived as less radical in its strategic approach and goals than the media justice sector (Belden, Russonello, & Stewart, 2006). Dichter (2004) goes so far as to describe the media justice movement as “in contrast and opposition to the existing field of media reformers” (p. 2).

Hackett and Carroll (2006) contend that “a multiplicity of frames is not necessarily a barrier to movement mobilization; there is even an advantage that different frames can appeal to different constituencies” (p. 79). Recent research suggests that leaders in the organizations comprising these various sectors “do not think they need an over-arching term, or way of articulating a common goal to their work. . . . most of them are more likely to want to explain their work in some detail rather than with a more approachable shorthand. These leaders also reveal little sense that their work would benefit from having all their efforts fly under one banner” (Belden, Russonello & Stewart, 2006, p. 5).

Arguing on behalf of the development of a unified frame, O'Siochru (2005) contends that "An overarching, unifying frame is needed in order to build the kind of broad movement that alone can be successful" (p. 304). In order to effectively capture the complexity of the movement, O'Siochru (2005) specifically advocates the use of the Right to Communicate as an overarching, "high-level" frame, under which more concrete "sub-frames" could be developed that would divide media and communications issues into several discrete, though inter-related, elements (p. 305). Possible sub-frames identified by O'Siochru (2005) include the public sphere, political and cultural diversity, information commons, and civil rights. These sub-frames then could be used to build "horizontal linkages" with related social movements (p. 305). Dichter (2004), in contrast, has argued that efforts to develop a single overarching framework for the movement and its activities may not be a pre-condition to a more widespread and influential social movement and therefore may not be an appropriate point of focus for the movement's energies.

### **Outcome Priorities**

Differences in the key framing principles that have characterized different components of the media reform movement have, to some degree, been reflected in different areas of emphasis in terms of outcomes, as different components of the movement have tended to emphasize different outcomes. Hackett and Adam (1999) offer a basic "structure" versus "content" categorization scheme, in which some components of the movement emphasize efforts to influence (i.e., improve) media content (particularly in areas such as minority representation, political coverage, and children's/educational content) (see, e.g., Duncan, 1999; Montgomery, 1989; Noriega, 2000; Swanson, 2000), while others focus primarily on structural issues pertaining to ownership and technological infrastructure (i.e., ownership concentration, minority



ownership, access to communications technologies) (see, e.g., Klinenberg, 2007; Opel, 2004; Scott, 2004).

Of course, these categories are far from mutually exclusive (Hackett & Adam, 1999), as structural change frequently is presumed to lead to content change. Indeed, the very origins of the modern media reform movement in the U.S. help illustrate this point. As will be discussed in greater detail below, many scholars point to the activities of the Office of Communication of the United Church of Christ (UCC) in the 1960s as the beginning of the modern media reform movement. The UCC worked to challenge the broadcast license of a television station in Mississippi that was providing racially biased programming and neglecting the needs and interests of the African-American community (see Classen, 2004; Clift, 1976; Mills, 2004). The UCC's efforts ultimately took the form of a license challenge in conjunction with civil rights groups that resulted in a license revocation, a change in station ownership, and, ultimately, programming that better reflected and served the needs of the African-American community. Here, then, we see concerns about content (in this case, racist programming practices) ultimately addressed via structural intervention (change in ownership). From this point onward, structure and content have been tightly linked in both media policymaking (see Napoli, 2001) and in the advocacy efforts of the media reform movement.<sup>7</sup>

It is important to emphasize that a broad conceptualization of this movement incorporates efforts to affect the structure and content of traditional mainstream media and communications systems *as well as* efforts to support and develop alternative media and communications systems (see, e.g., Atton, 2003; Beatty, 2000; Dagron, 2001; Pickard, 2006; Stengrim, 2005; Williams, 2001). Alternative media generally refer to media operated and controlled by self-organized, independent groups or associations, that often are non-commercial in their orientation, and that

are less hierarchical, bureaucratic, and commercial in their orientation than traditional mainstream commercial media outlets (see Hintz, 2007; Howley, 2005). Historically, conceptions of alternative media (particularly in the U.S.) have focused on the public broadcasting sector (see, e.g., Williams, 2001) and public access cable (see, e.g., Higgins, 1999; Steiner, 2005), but due to developments in media technology such as the Internet, WiFi, and LPFM, the realm of alternative media is now much more broadly constituted (see Howley, 2005).<sup>8</sup>

While there is some disagreement within the movement as to the relative value of emphasizing reforming mainstream media versus developing alternative media (see, e.g., Hackett & Carroll, 2006),<sup>9</sup> it often is the case that both activities are pursued simultaneously by individual media reform organizations (see, e.g., Klinenberg, 2004). A recent study of non-profits working in the media reform sector found that equally high proportions (96% of all organizations surveyed) were working on both mainstream and independent media issues, but with a slightly higher percentage (75% versus 69%) expending “significant effort” on mainstream media issues (Louie & Luckey, 2006, p. 10).

It also is the case that both activities involve engagement in the policymaking process. Such engagement is quite apparent in relation to the traditional mainstream media, as media reform advocates long have focused substantial energy on preserving or imposing policies directed at these media that foster goals such as diversity of ownership of media outlets, the availability of public interest-oriented content, and the development of widely accessible communications infrastructures (see Lloyd, 2007; Napoli, 2001). Efforts to develop alternative media also frequently require engagement with the policy sphere, as the development of such media frequently require specific policy actions. Thus, for instance, the recent growth of low

power FM radio was dependent upon the adoption of specific policies by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) that allowed for the licensing of LPFM stations (see, e.g., Hamilton, 2004; Howley, 2004; Opel, 2004).

### **Strategies and Tactics**

Lines of demarcation across the various actors involved in these different components of the broader media reform movement also can be drawn along strategic dimensions. Different outcome priorities often require different strategic approaches. Thus, in efforts to influence industry behavior directly (be it in terms of content or employment practices), the movement has employed tactics such as direct meetings and negotiations, protests, program monitoring, and boycotts (See, e.g., Fahey, 1991; Garay, 1978; Kim, 2001; Montgomery, 1981, 1989; Swanson, 2000).<sup>10</sup> Noriega (2000), for instance, documents the efforts of the Chicano media reform movement in the 1960s and 1970s to discourage stereotypical portrayals of Chicanos in television programming and advertising in which particular emphasis was placed on organized boycotts of advertisers' products and particular television programs, as well as on direct engagement with programmers and advertisers (see also Montgomery, 1989). In the realm of structure, on the other hand, focus has been placed on the policy process, with efforts devoted to participation in administrative proceedings, adjudication, and legislative activity (see, e.g., Schneyer, 1977).<sup>11</sup>

Hackett and Adam (1999) distinguish between "insider" and "outsider" strategies, with outsider strategies involving explicit and aggressive media criticism and protest and insider strategies focusing instead on efforts to alter the system from within, via tactics such as advocating for changes in hiring practices or via seeking regulatory change via traditional policy advocacy mechanisms. Along related lines, it is important to emphasize the distinction between

components of the movement that have targeted their activities at the policymaking sector (one could call these “indirect” strategies) and those that have targeted their activities directly at influencing the behavior of media organizations – i.e., “direct” strategies (see, e.g., Fahey, 1991; Hanks & Pickett, 1979; Montgomery, 1981,1989; Turow, 1984). The use of the direct and indirect terminology here reflects the notion that via policy avenues, reformers typically seek a reorientation of the media system that it is hoped will produce many of the content and behavioral outcomes that those advocating more direct strategies (be they in terms of influencing traditional mainstream media or in terms of establishing alternative media) also seek.

When we consider the current range of activities in light of what is widely considered the modern point of origin for the movement in the U.S., it is important to recognize once again the extent to which the movement’s modern origins straddled (albeit unintentionally at first) both the industry engagement and policy engagement approaches to affecting change. Indeed, much of the work of the UCC and the many public interest organizations spawned in the years following the WLBT decision focused less on influencing policy and more on directly influencing the behavior of individual broadcasters (see, e.g., Hanks & Pickett, 1979; Padden, 1972), only moving into the policy realm (via license renewal challenges) after direct efforts to alter broadcaster behavior broke down (see, e.g., Grundfest, 1977; Noriega, 2000; Schement, Gutierrez, Gandy, Haight, & Soriano, 1977).<sup>12</sup> And, when we look at media reform efforts prior to the 1960s, we see this same focus on seeking behavioral change within the industry rather than seeking policy change within the FCC or Congress (Toro, 2000).

### **Origins and Evolution: A Roadmap of the Media Reform Literature**

This section attempts to trace the growth and evolution of this extensive body of literature, and to offer some observations as to where this literature has originated (and why), as well as how it has changed over time. Thus, this section considers the literature on the media reform movement less in terms of its particular findings, but rather in terms of its theoretical evolution and points of origin.

### **Theoretical Evolution**

The nature of the primary theoretical lenses directed at the media reform movement has changed substantially over time. Early work lacked a strong theoretical perspective and was in fact highly legalistic in its orientation. That is, to the extent that the 60s and 70s era manifestation of the media reform movement was seen largely as an outgrowth of “public interest law,” due to the success at gaining legally recognized “standing” for citizens’ groups in the policymaking process that was a key element of the UCC’s accomplishments (see Horwitz, 1997), early assessments of the movement were focused very much on issues such as the appropriate role and function of these new public interest law organizations spawned by the UCC’s actions (see Schneyer, 1977; Schneyer & Lloyd, 1976) and on the various legal implications of the reconfigured dynamics of the policymaking process (see Padden, 1972; Garay, 1978; Grundfest, 1977).

When later work did employ a theoretical perspective, it tended to draw heavily from what often are called “interest group” theories of the policymaking process (see Galperin, 2004). Krasnow, Longley, and Terry’s (1982) well-known text on the politics of broadcast regulation (first published in 1978) has proven very influential (perhaps too influential) on research examining the dynamics of communications policymaking (Napoli, 2001). Their interest group approach consists primarily of identifying the key stakeholder groups involved in the

policymaking process and developing an inventory of their tools of influence. Assessing outcomes then involves identifying which groups were able to use their influence tools effectively and why.

When this theoretical framework is employed, representatives of the public interest/advocacy community tend to reside very much at the fringes of the policymaking process (Napoli, 2001). As Galperin (2004) notes, “Most varieties of interest group approaches see a rather small margin for public interest advocacy,” (p. 160) due in large part to the “free rider” problem that characterizes public interest groups and, more broadly, social movements (see also Raboy, 1994). Such entities are constrained by the fact that most beneficiaries of a successful movement lack incentives to undertake the necessary work for the movement to be successful, since the costs are greater than the benefits that the individual would personally receive (Hackett, 2000; Thomas, 2006). This creates a disincentive for direct citizen involvement or for citizen support for the public interest/advocacy organizations presumably working on their behalf.

The prominence of this theoretical perspective meant that, in most scholarly assessments, the public and the public interest groups that work (presumably) on their behalf traditionally have been given very marginal status in the policymaking process, particularly in relation to industry stakeholders (see, e.g., Cantor & Cantor, 1986; Hanks & Pickett, 1979; Turow, 1984). Some early work (e.g., Grundfest, 1977) even considered the increased citizen influence in communications policymaking achieved by the media reform movement in the 1960s and 1970s as something of an anomaly with the potential to unfavorably disrupt the established – and desired – dynamics of policymaking.

Analyses that employ an interest-group theory approach to the policymaking process have, perhaps inevitably, tended to focus on chronicling particular policy issues, the stakeholder

battle surrounding these issues, and the generally marginal influence that the public interest/advocacy field ultimately was able to have on the outcome. Thus, as a result of this analytical orientation, there is a substantial component of the academic literature on communications and media policymaking in which the activities of media reform organizations receive scant consideration (for a review of this literature, see Napoli, 2001). During this prolonged period, even scholarship that inquired into the possibility that media reform could constitute a distinct social movement concluded that such a transformation had yet to take place (Broderick, 1984).

Recent research, however, has been much more inclined to conceptualize the activities of citizens and public interest and advocacy organizations as the manifestation of a legitimate social movement, and in so doing, its analytical focus broadens beyond the policymaking process, into the (often intersecting) realms of the development of alternative and community media forms and citizen activism at the local level. Thus, Howley's (2004) assessment that "movement studies and media studies alike have failed to recognize an emerging media democratization movement" (p. 222) seems less appropriate today than in years past. A multitude of recent studies have conceptualized media reform as a social movement and have applied social movement theory in an effort to enhance our understanding of the movement itself, its prospects, as well as social movements in general (see, e.g., Atton, 2003; Calabrese, 2004; Brinson, 2006, 2007; Carroll & Hackett, 2006; Hackett & Adam, 1999; Hackett & Carroll, 2006; Opel, 2004; Mueller, Page, & Kuerbis, 2004; Noriega, 2000; Schiller, 1999; O'Siochru, 1999; Thomas, 2006; White, 1995).

This pattern is interesting considering that what frequently has been considered the heyday of the media reform movement (at least in the U.S.) – the 1960s and 1970s – seldom was

approached by scholars from a social movement theory perspective. This may be a reflection of the extent to which the movement at that point was deeply embedded within (and in fact emerged from) the civil rights movement (Classen, 2004; Horwitz, 1997; see below). Such embedding perhaps concealed media reform from scholarly attention beneath a much broader and higher-profile social movement, or at the very least discouraged a narrow and exclusive social movement focus on media reform.

Today, however, a more compelling case can be made that media reform is increasingly establishing its own identity as a more independent and self-sustaining social movement, based on criteria such as the prominence of media and communications policy issues on the government agenda (Mueller, Kuerbis, & Page, 2004); an increased public awareness of – and concern about – media and communications policy issues as exhibited in public opinion polls (see Scott, 2004); the growth in the number of public interest and advocacy organizations that focus on such issues (Mueller, Kuerbis, & Page, 2004); the constituency/membership growth of these organizations (McChesney & Nichols, 2005); and the growth in the interest of the funding community in media reform issues (Louie & Luckey, 2006). These indicators of the growing independence and self-sustaining nature of the media reform movement may then be driving the blossoming of social movement scholarship that has taken media reform as its point of focus.

As the patterns outlined above would suggest, there has been some shift in terms of the academic disciplines/fields from which research examining the media reform movement has originated. Recent years have seen a particular increase in attention to media reform from within sociology (e.g., Atton, 2003; Brinson, 2006, 2007; Klinenberg, 2004, 2007), a discipline that traditionally has devoted substantial attention to the study of social movements. That being said, the study of the media reform movement has been, and continues to be, a highly inter-



disciplinary point of focus for scholarship. Not surprisingly, the inherently interdisciplinary field of communications/media studies has been perhaps the most consistent in its focus on the media reform movement, given the centrality of many of the issues reflected in the media reform movement to the communications field (see, e.g., Beatty, 2000; Hackett & Carroll, 2006b; McChesney, 1993; Pickard, 2006; Schiller, 2007). As cultural studies has emerged as an independent field, it too has devoted substantial attention to media reform (e.g., Calabrese, 2004; O'Siochru, 2004; Stengrim, 2005; Wible, 2004).

Disciplines in which the study of media reform has, historically, been less prominent include political science, public policy, and law. This may be a reflection of: a) the extent to which the study of media-related issues has been, and to some degree continues to be, a topic that the political science and public policy fields consider of marginal significance within traditional parameters of the discipline;<sup>13</sup> and b) the extent to which the media reform movement has extended beyond its origins within the field of public interest law, leading legal scholars' interest in the subject to wane in the years since the movement's original heyday in the late 1960s and 1970s (see, e.g., Branscomb & Savage, 1978; Grundfest, 1977; Padden, 1972; Schneyer, 1977; Schneyer & Lloyd, 1976). It is likely also the case that the period of time when the media reform movement represented a dramatic reconfiguration of the status quo of communications policymaking led to the period of pronounced attention from the legal community that has since waned as the movement has matured and its place within the policymaking process has become less disruptive to the institutional dynamics of policymaking.

### **The Movement as Self-Generator of Scholarship**

One key characteristic of the academic literature on the media reform movement is that it has, to a significant degree, been internally-generated. That is, many of the researchers examining the movement from an academic perspective are (or were) themselves participants in the movement (e.g., Chester, 2006; Dichter, 2004; Lloyd, 2007; Pickard, 2006; Scott, 2004). Participants in the micro-radio movement in the U.S. have been particularly active in terms of turning a scholarly lens upon their activities and those of their colleagues (e.g., Brinson, 2006, 2007; Coopman, 2000; Howley, 2000, 2004; Opel, 2004) as have international activists engaged in global policy deliberations such as WSIS and ICANN (Hintz, 2007; Klein, 2001, 2004; Mueller, 2002a, 2002b; O'Siochru, 2004).

This pattern is not surprising given the increasingly (and, many would argue, appropriately) blurred line between scholarship and advocacy that characterizes the media policy field (see Dutton, 2005). This pattern also may reflect a broader pattern in social movement scholarship, in which participants in the movement often are key actors in developing the relevant scholarly literature and placing the movement on the broader academic research agenda. Social movement scholars Eyerman and Jamison (1991), for instance, noted such a pattern in their assessment of the student anti-war movement in the U.S. in the 1960s: "Being a movement dominated by actors engaged primarily in intellectual pursuits, it should thus not be surprising that student activists began to develop their own theoretical understandings of the movement" (p. 20). Todd Gitlin's (2003) well-known analysis of the interaction between the media and the student movement is a prime example of that social movement's scholarship emerging from within the movement itself. Unfortunately, Eyerman and Jamison (1991) offer little reflection on what having such a self-generating process at the core of social movement scholarship might mean for our understanding of these social movements.

What are the implications (if any) of the prominence of internally-generated scholarship to our understanding of social movements such as media reform? One could argue that the credibility of such work is enhanced by the level of access afforded by such participant-observation approaches. One could also argue that such approaches may be lacking in the desired degree of academic objectivity and critical distance from the subject. When considering these questions, it is important to emphasize that it is not the entirety of the scholarship on media reform that has been generated from within, only that a significant component of this literature has such a point of origin. At the very least, this pattern makes clear that the traditional barriers that have separated scholars and activists in the media policy field appear to be breaking down. But it may be that the continued diffusion of media reform scholarship beyond those immersed in the movement can provide a broader array of analytical perspectives, conclusions, and recommendations.

### **Media Reform as Social Movement: Key Findings, Recommendations, and Critiques**

This section explores recurring themes within the substantive findings on the research examining the media reform movement. This section is concerned with: a) determining how the application of a social movement perspective has enhanced our understanding of media reform; b) distilling the key critiques and recommendations for the media reform movement that have emerged from these analyses.

### **Media Reform as a Social Movement**

Exploring media reform through a social movement lens first requires that we establish definitional parameters for a social movement. Social movements have been defined as “sentiment[s] or activit[ies] shared by two or more people oriented toward changes in social

relations or in the social system” (Ash Garner & Zald, 1987, p. 293). A specific focus of many social movements is institutional change, which can be thought of as systematic adjustments in the “rules-based processes that channel social interaction” (Mueller, Kuerbis, & Page, 2004). These adjustments generally involve changes in rules and norms that alter the distribution of wealth and power in a significant way, and that become legitimate and self-reproducing over time (Mueller, Kuerbis, & Page, 2004).

Media reform increasingly has been viewed by social movement scholars as meeting these criteria, due in large part to the extent to which the issues at the core of media reform are beginning to resonate more widely, and thereby contribute to a more intensive public pressure on policymakers and industry actors than has characterized media and communications policy issues throughout much of their history (see Brinson, 2006; Calabrese, 2004; Hackett & Carroll, 2006). However, assessments of media reform as a social movement do still tend to conclude that the movement remains largely on the periphery of the national and international issue agenda (Hackett & Carroll, 2006; Mueller, Kuerbis, & Page, 2004); and therefore there is a need to assess the movement’s current state in an effort to identify mechanisms for enhancing its stability and status within the broader political sphere. The sections that follow explore other defining characteristics of social movements and their applicability to media reform, in an effort to generate insights into the unique challenges and opportunities facing the movement and into particular strategic approaches to be employed in order to strengthen the movement.

#### *The Ebb and Flow of the Media Reform Movement*

As Calabrese (2004) notes, “Social movements are, by their very nature, *episodic* and *issue driven*” (p. 324). This characterization certainly fits for the media reform movement, where individual policy issues have, at various times, galvanized both public and public

interest/advocacy group attention. When we look at the media reform movement's history – as represented through the scholarship it has generated – we see very clearly how its progression appears very much episodic, and very much a function of particular policy events or the emergence of particular policy issues.

As was noted above, many scholars of the media reform movement identify the court case *Office of Communication of the United Church of Christ v. Federal Communications Commission* (1966) as a watershed moment in the development of this movement (Branscomb & Savage, 1978; Rubin, 2002; Schneyer & Lloyd, 1976),<sup>14</sup> though, as Horwitz (1997) notes, the movement that emerged from this decision in many respects “represented a resurrection of the old 1930s broadcast reform coalition. But this time the educators, religious people, and intellectuals were part of a broader tapestry of liberal activist groups in civil society” (p. 313).

McChesney's (1993) provides a thorough account of the rise and decline of this earlier manifestation of the media reform movement, which developed primarily around the introduction of radio broadcasting and the associated debate over how best to structure and oversee the new system of radio broadcasting in the United States. Thus, there were historical moments that galvanized the media reform movement well before the UCC's battle with Mississippi broadcasters and the Federal Communications Commission, and that were less explicitly tied to civil rights issues. Indeed, as Toro (2000) notes, it would be a mistake to assume that the media reform movement originated as recently as the 1960s. Both Toro (2000) and Williams (2001) provide detailed historical accounts of media reform activity across a wide range of areas (including educational/public broadcasting, broadcaster public interest obligations, license challenges, and even involving petitioning for citizens groups' rights to participate in the policymaking process) that extend from the 1930s through the 1950s and early 1960s. Schiller

(1999) traces the history back even further, chronicling the (largely unsuccessful) activities of trade unions, civic reformers, and academics from 1894 through 1919 directed at the development of the telephone infrastructure, particularly in terms of advocating on behalf of universal access and municipal ownership during a time of policymaker uncertainty over how best to regulate telephony (not unlike the later period of uncertainty over how best to regulate broadcasting).<sup>15</sup>

A key difference between these earlier historical moments and the UCC/FCC conflict in the 1960s, however, was that the UCC's success establishing standing for citizens and citizens' groups in FCC proceedings served as a springboard for the continued growth of the movement. According to Branscomb and Savage (1978), organizations ranging from Action for Children's Television, the Gray Panther Media Task Force, the Media Committee of the National Organization for Women, the Chinese for Affirmative Action, and the National Black Media Coalition, were direct outgrowths of the UCC decision.<sup>16</sup> Quantitative assessments of the organizational ecology of the communications and information policy advocacy field confirm this perspective, documenting the fastest growth in advocacy organizations over the past 40 years taking place during the late 1960s and 1970s (Mueller, Kuerbis, & Page, 2004). A key factor in the growth of these organizations during this time period was their ability to attract funding from foundations that had developed in interest in communications policy issues, such as the Ford Foundation (a key early funder of the Office of Communications of the United Church of Christ) and the Markle Foundation (a key early funder of the UCC spin-off, the Media Access Project) (see Kopp, 1997; Lenert, 2003).

This growth of media reform activity in the U.S. was accompanied internationally by the growth of the New World Information and Communication Order movement, which was

motivated in large part by the increasing prominence of transnational media flows, concerns over cultural imperialism, and growing disparities in communications infrastructures (Galtung & Vincent, 2002; Traber & Nordenstreng, 1992). It is out of this movement that the associated communication rights movement (which has recently re-emerged [see below] as the Communication Rights for the Information Society movement) first developed, via the articulation by the UNESCO-appointed MacBride (1980) Commission of the right to communicate as a distinctive and multi-faceted human right.

Both domestically and internationally, however, the 1980s and early 1990s have been characterized by many researchers as a period of significant decline in the activities of the media reform movement (Bollier, 2000; Chester, 2007; Kopp, 2000). During this time period, the number of public interest and advocacy organizations working in this field diminished dramatically (Mueller, Kuerbis, & Page, 2004). This drop-off has been attributed to a number of causes, including changing funding priorities among the relatively few private foundations that were devoted to supporting organizations in this area, the growth of industry lobbying efforts, and associated deregulatory changes that undermined media reform organizations' traditional avenues of influence (Broderick, 1984).<sup>17</sup>

In the early 1990s, however, many scholars noted an upsurge in media reform activity, spurred this time by developments in telecommunications technology and infrastructure usage, accessibility, and affordability – particularly in relation to the emergence of the Internet. On the global scale, these developments spurred the movement for Communication Rights for the Information Society (Powers, 2005), while in the U.S. the movement focused its energies on the Clinton administration's efforts to develop a National Information Infrastructure (Drake, 1997; Munn, 1999). The rise of international policymaking fora in the late 1990s such as the United

Nation's World Summits on the Information Society (WSIS) and the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) further mobilized the broadly-constituted media reform community by providing specific avenues for potential influence (see Franklin, 2005; Hintz, 2007; Mueller, 2002a, 2002b; O'Siochru, 2004; Selian, 2004).

The primary concerns during this time period (both domestically and internationally) involved whether the developing, and increasingly vital, communications infrastructure was going to be universally accessible; whether free speech rights and privacy rights were going to be respected in its development and administration; and whether diversity and community were going to be policy priorities (Munn, 1999; Powers, 2005). And during this time period, as was the case in the 1960s, the movement was broadly constituted, with "organizations ranging from traditional media watchdogs, civil liberties advocates and consumer groups, to advocates for schools and libraries, children, the elderly, disabled, minorities and the poor" becoming involved in the policymaking process (Munn, 1999, p. 71). Munn (1999) attributes this phenomenon to "the widespread perception of advanced information technologies and services as a solution to pressing social problems and to the excitement of their potential and promise for improving the circumstances of people and communities" (p. 77). The potential social, political, and economic significance of these developments in the media and communications sector in turn helped attract the attention of funders, many of whom had exited the media and communications policy advocacy arena in the late 1970s and 1980s (see Bollier, 2000; Kopp, 1997). A recent assessment of the funding environment for media reform has noted that "the last few years have seen an influx of philanthropic funders' interest in the public policies that shape how our media are created and distributed, as well as how we, as citizens, engage with it" (Louie & Luckey, 2006, p. 4).



Hackett and Carroll (2004) specifically note the growth in momentum for the media reform movement since 1996. It was during this time that the Cultural Environment Movement (founded by well-known communications scholar George Gerbner) was launched in an effort to explicitly link the concerns and rhetorical approaches of the media reform movement – particularly those related to content – with those of the environmental movement (Duncan, 1999). It was also during this time that the first of two Media and Democracy Congresses were held. And while these particular institutions did not endure, a significant number of related institutions arose to take their place (see Mueller, Kuerbis, & Page, 2004).

Hackett and Carroll (2004) attribute this upsurge in the movement's activity to a number of factors, including widespread discontent with the Telecommunications Act of 1996, and, years later, to the apparent disinformation – and the role of the news media in the propagation of this information – associated with the U.S.'s involvement in Iraq (see also McChesney & Nichols, 2005), as well as to the tangible demise of local programming in radio, the industry sector most profoundly and visibly affected by the deregulatory initiatives of the 1996 Act.<sup>18</sup> Like Hackett and Carroll (2004), Mueller, Kuerbis, and Page (2004) also emphasize the transformative nature of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, though they interpret the Act's key significance as reorienting activists groups away from their traditional focus on mass media content and toward infrastructure regulation issues (see also Drake, 1997; Lenert, 2003). Other scholars have emphasized the late-90s attention generated by the pirate/free radio movement and the resulting FCC initiative on low power FM radio (see Brinson, 2006) as a key force in the revitalization of the media reform movement (Brinson, 2007; Dick & McDowell, 2000; Howley, 2000; Opel, 2004; Stavitsky, Avery, & Vanhala, 2001).<sup>19</sup>

The recent resurgence in the media reform movement in the U.S. also has been attributed in large part to the FCC's biennial (now quadrennial) media ownership proceeding – particularly the 2002/2003 proceeding (e.g., Brown & Blevins, 2005; McChesney, 2004; Scott, 2004). The galvanizing of public attention to this issue is well-illustrated by the fact that over 500,000 comments – many of them by individual citizens – were submitted to the FCC in connection with the ownership proceeding (Holman, 2005). FCC Commissioner Michael Copps described the ownership proceeding as awakening “a sleeping giant” in terms of focusing citizen attention, concern, and most important, influence, on media policy issues to an extent never before seen in the U.S. (quoted in Newman & Scott, 2005, p. 25).<sup>20</sup> The movement's success on this front was perceived not only in terms of preventing the FCC's effort to further relax the existing media ownership rules, but also in terms of the emergence of new organizations devoted to media reform, fostering new collaborations between existing groups, and in terms of generating an overall heightened interest in media policy issues within the broader public (Chester, 2007; Matani, Spilka, Borgman-Arboleda, & Dichter, 2003) and the funding community (Louie & Luckey, 2006). It would also appear that this uptick in media reform activity is less concentrated in the legal sector than was the case during the movement's earlier peak in the 1960s and 1970s. Longitudinal research indicates that in 1975 public interest law organizations devoted an average of 14% of their time and resources to media reform, but only 5% in 2004 (Nielsen & Albiston, 2006).

#### *Media Reform Linkages with Other Social Movements*

As should be clear, then, the media reform movement adheres to the characteristics of other social movements in terms of the extent to which its progression appears highly episodic and tightly linked with specific public, or public policy, issues. However, when we continue to

apply a social movement theory framework to media reform, we also see important ways that media reform may be unique in relation to other social movements.

White (1995) identifies a number of points of intersection between social movement theory and the media reform movement. These include: a) that social movements are themselves essentially communication patterns that emerge “‘outside’ and in opposition to the existing institutional, hierarchical (non-democratic) structure of communications in a society” (White, 1995, p. 93); b) that social movements tend to introduce and legitimate alternative patterns of communication that tend to be more egalitarian and participatory; c) that social movements “renovate and democratize virtually all aspects of the communication process” (White, 1995, p. 93), be it in terms of participation, use of new technologies, the definition of professional roles and training, or in terms of new codes of ethics and values guiding policy; and d) that social movements that introduce major socio-cultural shifts also tend to introduce a new culture of public communication. In these ways, it would appear that the movement to reform or democratize the system of public communication is inextricably intertwined with central dimensions of all social movements. Thus, from a social movement standpoint media reform is unique in that it “treats communication as simultaneously means and end of struggle” (Carroll & Hackett, 2006, p. 96).

It is in fact this unique aspect of the relationship between media reform and social movements more broadly that has generated as substantial amount of scholarly discussion – with the specific issue being whether media reform is best conceptualized as an independent, free-standing social movement rather than purely an integral component of all social movements. Research by Hackett and Adam (1999) suggests that participants within media reform often do not see the movement as being able to stand on its own; rather, “media reform must be linked to

other progressive movements” (p. 127). Others have observed that the origins of the media reform movement (at least in the U.S.), as well as the movement’s greatest successes, have been derived primarily from the movement’s positioning within broader social movements. Mueller (2002b) characterizes media policy issues as “the tail, not the dog” in terms of public interest activism in the United States during the formative years of the modern media reform movement. That is, according to Mueller (2002b), “advocacy in media policy was completely subordinate to, and reflective of, the agenda of broader social movements regarding civil rights, environmentalism and consumerism” (p. 8). Echoing this perspective, Horwitz (1997) concludes that the success of the 60s/70s-era media reform movement in the U.S. “stemmed largely from its connection to the broader social movement of Civil Rights” (p. 344). A mid-1980s assessment of what strategies and tactics should be employed to foster a legitimate social movement in the area of media reform (determining, obviously, at that point, that such a movement did not yet exist) concluded that the movement should build upon its original ties to the civil rights movement (Broderick, 1984).

If media reform is conceived as an integral subcomponent of, and thus primarily subordinate to, other social movements, then its success depends in large part upon developing successful linkages with these movements. Analyses of specific linking strategies have emphasized focusing on groups with at least a tangential stake in a transformed communications environment, whether it be organized labor, human rights organizations, or groups working on behalf of the poor or underprivileged (e.g., Costanza-Chock, 2002). A number of scholars and activists have consequently sought to articulate the ways in which a reformed media environment would facilitate improved communication to potential constituencies for other social movements (Carroll & Hackett, 2006; Brinson, 2006). As Carroll and Hackett (2006) argue, “If media

activist groups are successful in their efforts to open up mainstream media to a diversity of voices and to create effective alternative media . . . the political beneficiaries will be none other than other progressive movements” (p. 91; see also Brinson, 2007). As a result, “media reform can change the playing field on which actors compete for media attention, strengthening the positions of some actors (in this case, social movement actors) relative to others” (Brinson, 2006, p. 564). Reflecting this perspective, Pozner (2005) argues that substantive media reform is an essential prerequisite for the development of the feminist movement. McChesney and Nichols (2002) see the media reform movement as possessing a broad array of “natural allies, organizations that should be sympathetic to media reform . . . organized labor, teachers, librarians, civil libertarians, artists, religious denominations, and groups involved with a broad range of civil rights advocacy” (p. 127). From this perspective, the media reform movement can be perceived, as one activist has described it, as a “‘meta-movement, a movement of movements,’ precisely due to the strategic centrality of mediated communication in contemporary society” (Hackett & Carroll, 2006, p. 188).

Many studies of the movement have, however, concluded that the strong linking of media reform with other social movements has not, for the most part, been accomplished effectively (e.g., Mason, 2006; Thomas, 2006). Hackett and Carroll (2006) found, for instance, that none of the non-media activists interviewed in their research named media activist groups as important constituents of a potential coalition. Gangadharan (2007) claims that prominent civil rights organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Rainbow Coalition, and the Lawyer’s Committee for Civil Rights have been “conspicuously silent on media policy and law” (p. 1).

Brinson (2006) suggests that foregrounding media reform as a mechanism for facilitating the development of other social movements may lack appeal to these movements due to the fact that it is very much a “long-term strategy” (p. 547) at a time when most organizations involved in social movements lack the luxury of adopting a long-term perspective. As Brinson (2006) argues, “it may be unwise or inefficient for most social movements to choose this strategy to achieve their goals since reform of the media may not be a primary movement objective” (p. 561). Along these lines, it is worth noting that a recent assessment of the interaction between law, the media, and environmental policy, which focused in large part on the importance of mainstream media coverage to successful environmental advocacy, contained a series of recommendations about how environmental advocates could better engage the media, but did not address at all how media reform efforts could play a role in the movement’s efforts to obtain more and better media coverage (Plater, 2006). Instead, the media system, with its increased concentration, increasingly commercial orientation, and diminished commitment to hard news reporting (all characteristics identified in the study), is treated as a static system that environmental advocates must figure out how to navigate effectively (Plater, 2006).

Labor unions, in particular, have been identified in a number of studies as a constituency that would seem to potentially benefit tremendously from successful media reform efforts, but that has, for the most part, neglected to interact with the media reform movement (Fones-Wolf, 2006a; Hackett & Carroll, 2006). Fones-Wolf (2006a, 2006b) has documented how organized labor, was, in fact, an integral component of the post-World War II media reform movement in the U.S., particularly in terms of developing the notion of “listener’s rights” that has become an integral element of contemporary media reform (see Toro, 2000) and in terms of spearheading efforts to bring a greater diversity of sources and viewpoints to the airwaves.<sup>21</sup> However, by the

1950s and 1960s, due in large part to the political climate surrounding the Cold War, labor become marginalized from the policymaking process and, as a result, “labor was never again a major force in the media reform movement, leaving it to become the province primarily of middle-class intellectuals” (Fones-Wolf, 2006b, p. 515).

Along related lines, constituency groups with a more direct stake in media reform outcomes, such as media industry trade unions, the advertising industry, or the creative community (see Batt, Katz, & Keefe, 1999; Dolber, 2007; Mosco, 2007) would also seem to represent natural strategic partners if media reform’s relationship with labor were conceptualized a bit more narrowly (i.e., to focus only on those sectors *directly* affected by changes in the media system). Hackett and Carroll (2006), in their model of the “social sources” for media democratization, place groups within and around media industries, such as journalists, media workers, and librarians, at the core of their concentric spheres of actors contributing to the media reform movement. Yet, as these same authors note, constituent groups such as journalists have, for the most part, maintained their distance from the media reform movement despite the many ways in which their working conditions and career prospects could be improved if the media environment were to change along the lines advocated by reformists (Hackett & Carroll, 2006). Part of the problem may be that journalists themselves often are the target of criticism of media reform groups, which undermines the likelihood of any alliance-building. The journalistic culture of objectivity may further impede linkages between journalistic organizations and media reform advocacy organizations (Hackett & Carroll, 2006).<sup>22</sup>

To the extent that media reform is theoretically intertwined with all social movements via its concern with developing and maintaining a robust and free-flowing communications environment, and to the extent that the firm embedding of media reform into the agendas of other

social movements has not taken place, then there would seem to be the need to explore possible disconnects between theory and practice. Failures to tightly link media reform with broader social issues – particularly in the U.S. – may be a reflection of what Eyerman and Jamison (1991) see as a key characteristic of U.S. social movements – that they “have been almost aggressively single-issue oriented” (p. 37). If this is indeed the case, then we probably should question whether a long-term strategy in which media reform is consistently piggy-backing on larger and potentially more salient public issues is an appropriate path for the media reform movement to follow.

The media reform movement’s ability to accomplish its goals – whether they be considered free-standing or ancillary to those of other social movements – may, however, face a unique challenge. It has been well-documented how both the traditional mass media and, increasingly, newer communications technologies such as the Internet, factor significantly in the creation and mobilization of any social movement, including the media reform movement (see, e.g., Cogburn, 2004; Coopman, 2000; Holman, 2005; Klein, 1995; Meikle, 2002). Mainstream media coverage is necessary for any social movement to: a) attract public attention and support; b) achieve a measure of validation and legitimization within public discourse and, by association the general public and policymakers; and c) broaden the scope of the conflict to sympathetic third parties (Gamson & Wolfsfield, 1993).

And so, while communication is both the means and ends of media reform, in terms of means, the movement’s ability to attract the media coverage necessary to accomplish the functions outlined above may be uniquely compromised (see Hackett & Carroll, 2004). As Thomas (2006) states, “While there are no guarantees for the positive media coverage of any given social movement, reporting media reform movements is doubly complicated for the simple



reason that the primary targets for reform are media structures and practices” (p. 294). This creates a tremendous disincentive for mainstream media organizations to inform the public about the activities and concerns of the media reform movement. Some observers have gone so far as to describe this situation as a conflict of interest (Broderick, 1984, p. 317). A number of studies have, in fact, confirmed these suspicions, documenting dismal levels of news media coverage for media policy issues, as well as patterns in the coverage that would suggest that the policy interests of the media organizations are exerting a strong influence over such decisions (Gilens & Hertzman, 2000; Snider, 2005).<sup>23</sup> This situation poses something of a troubling Catch-22 for the media reform movement – one of the key mechanisms by which the movement can accomplish its goals may be foreclosed it, precisely because of the nature of the movement’s goals.

This set of circumstances allows for a somewhat different interpretation of the oft-made observation that the issues at the core of media reform movement are not likely to reach the top of citizens’ policy priorities in the face of more tangible concerns such as health care, taxes, or education. As Thomas (2005) has noted within the context of the Communication Rights for the Information Society movement, “The public salience of a number of issues currently prioritized by the communication rights movement . . . is low precisely because these issues do not affect the day to day lives of the vast majority of global citizens” (p. 7). Similarly, Broderick (1984) has emphasized that many of the positive and negative impacts of communications technologies simply “are not concrete enough to organize people around” (p. 316; see also Toro, 2000). A number of scholars have emphasized the communication difficulties associated with articulating the range of concerns associated with media reform in the kind of fairly simple language that is necessary to attract newcomers and the uninitiated to the movement and that is necessary for the conduct of an effective campaign (O’Siochrú, 2005; Thomas, 2006). While these may, in fact,

be characteristics of the media reform movement's core issues that undermine broad public resonance, it may very well be the case that these limitations are compounded by the fact that the mainstream media coverage that traditionally has been considered essential to generating the kind of issue salience and citizen awareness necessary to support a free-standing social movement is uniquely difficult to achieve in the realm of media reform.

### *Media Reform Movement Critiques*

Contained within the wide-ranging literature on the media reform movement are a number of recurring critiques about the movement's organization and effectiveness. A social movement analytical lens helps illustrate how many of these critiques reflect characteristics common to all social movements. For instance, scholars of social movements have recognized that, particularly in the U.S., "social movements are often, if not always, two movements in one" (Eyerman & Jamison, 1991, p. 37), with activists at the local grassroots level speaking different languages to different audiences, and utilizing different strategies for change than the D.C.-based advocacy organizations that represent the public interest within the federal policymaking sector but are largely cut off from the grassroots organizations and activities. This dynamic frequently has been identified as a source of tension in U.S. social movements, and this bifurcated nature has been reflected in two distinct academic traditions in the study of social movements (Eyerman & Jamison, 1991). Mueller, Kuerbis, & Page's (2004) analysis of the evolution of media activism noted just such a distinction. The authors emphasize the importance of distinguishing between the grass roots level of "*activism or social movement activity*" and the more formally organized citizens groups that interact directly with policymakers, which the authors refer to as "*advocacy . . . rooted in advocacy organizations*" (Mueller, Kuerbis, & Page, 2004, p. 6).

The critique that arises from this structural tendency, however, is that there seldom appears to be sufficient coordination and communication between the federally-focused and grassroots advocacy organizations (see, e.g., Dichter, 2005; Hackett & Adam, 1999; Listening Project, 2004; McChesney & Nichols, 2002; Schneyer & Lloyd, 1976). Studies ranging from those examining the 1930s-era media reform movement in the U.S. (McChesney, 1993) to those examining the contemporary Communication Rights for the Information Society movement (Thomas, 2006) to those examining community-based youth media justice organizations (Klinenberg, 2004) have been consistent in their assessment that the broadly-defined media reform movement has been hampered by a failure of the organizations that comprise the movement to work in unison. Even at the movement's first high point in the 1960s and 1970s, it "did not constitute a unified, coherent set of organizations," but rather "a very loose confederation of groups that shared a common bond" (Munn, 1999, p. 62).

Brinson (2007) has examined this issue of cooperation (or lack thereof) between the grassroots and the federal-level activist organizations within the context of the free radio movement. He concludes that policy change should not be seen as purely the province of the D.C.-based advocacy organizations, contending instead that "actions by grassroots activists outside the policy arena can contribute in significant ways towards making those changes (Brinson, 2007, p. 2). As he also notes, the combined influence of the grassroots and the federal-level advocacy organizations on policy that contributed to the development of low-power FM radio took place with very little cooperative or coordinated activity taking place between these two groups.

One explanation for this persistent observation of a lack of collaboration and cooperation may be the intense competition among many groups for a relatively small pool of available

funding that has frequently been noted (Hackett & Adam, 1999; Klinenberg, 2007; Thomas, 2006). This dynamic has been described as discouraging openness and information-sharing, particularly given the traditional tendency of funders in this area to tend to fund specific projects rather than long-term institution building (Hackett, 2000),<sup>24</sup> and the availability of such funding to be highly dependent upon the priorities of individuals within these funding organizations, which can, of course, change as the decision-makers involved change (Mueller, 2002b).<sup>25</sup>

More generally, this competition for funding has been seen as contributing to a persistent fragmentation of the movement, as organizations emphasize establishing and maintaining their own distinctive identity and mission – and even potentially narrowing their focus – in order to stand out to potential funders. These tendencies reflect a broader identity-related phenomenon related to interest groups labeled *issue niche theory* by political scientist William Browne (1990), in which advocacy organizations establish increasingly narrow niches for themselves in an effort to maintain their long-term viability.<sup>26</sup> As one media justice activist interviewed by Klinenberg (2004) noted, “The fear of collaborating is that funders can just write one of us off – they have to know how each of us is different” (p. 187). In this way, funding shortages may be a key driver of fragmentation and diminished cooperation.<sup>27</sup> Finally, this dynamic also has been characterized as encouraging tendencies to denigrate the activities of other sectors of the movement, and thereby undermine efforts at collaboration and division of labor (Hackett and Carroll, 2006).<sup>28</sup>

A second common observation among assessments of the organizational dynamics of the media reform movement is the tendency for key organizations within the movement to be established and sustained through the leadership of a single individual. This centralization of leadership has led, according to some assessments, to relatively limited efforts on the parts of

these organizations to achieve broad, far-reaching memberships or to seek alliances with other organizations, due to reasons ranging from limited resources to a desire to maintain highly centralized and autonomous decision-making (see, e.g., Branscomb & Savage, 1978). Following in a similar vein, research by Dichter (2005) suggests that the reform movement long has been characterized by a significant centralization and hierarchy of power, a lack of diversity in the leadership ranks, and a failure to integrate the full range of interested stakeholders into the movement's activities and decision-making.

Extending such critiques, Sherman (2004) has provided what is, to date, the most detailed inquiry into the extent to which organizations within the movement reflect the needs and interests of the broader public. The overarching concern that guides her study is that "Leaders of public interest groups, by not actively engaging citizens as part of their daily activities, can easily find themselves perpetuating their own personal interests" (Sherman, 2004, p. 4). According to Sherman (2004), such tendencies can undermine the extent to which public interest organizations develop appropriate policy positions, as well as the extent to which these groups can be held accountable for their decisions. Of course, such concerns are complicated by the extent to which the general public is often perceived by the public interest community as insufficiently informed in regards to communications policy issues (Sherman, 2004),<sup>29</sup> and the extent to which common manifestations of public opinion (e.g., polling data) appear to play a relatively insignificant role in media policy debates (Gandy, 2003). Nonetheless, Sherman (2004) concludes that the public interest/advocacy community is, for the most part, too detached from the broader constituency they presumably represent.<sup>30</sup>

Such dynamics have led to questions, both within and outside of the academic literature, as to whether such a movement can truly be considered representative of the broader public

interest (e.g., Padden, 1972). That is, are the organizations that comprise the media reform movement truly representative of the broader “public interest?” As Kim (2001) has noted within the context of audience-based reform movements in Korea, “what right do audience representative bodies have to speak on behalf of all audiences?” (p. 105). To the extent that the reform movement tends to be dominated by groups of individuals who may not be representative of the population as a whole, questions of the legitimacy of these groups may naturally arise (see, e.g., Dichter, 2004; Kim, 2001). As Schneyer and Lloyd (1976) noted in one of the earliest assessments of the media reform movement in the U.S., “the legitimacy of national media-reform organizations extends no farther than their service to client consumer groups” (p. 21). To the extent that generating strong and broad-based public support is a fundamental component of a legitimate social movement (see, e.g., Ash Garner & Zald, 1987; Eyerman & Jamison, 1991), or even to the establishment of a clear identity in the policymaking environment for any interest group (Heaney, 2007),<sup>31</sup> the extent to which media reform remains to some extent the province of an insular group of committed activists and advocates undermines its status as a full-fledged social movement and the extent to which we can anticipate the large-scale institutional change that many social movements have been able to achieve. However, recent events such as the National Conference on Media Reform (the most recent of which attracted over 3,500 attendees from around the country) and the public outcry over the FCC’s 2003 media ownership decision (see Scott, 2004) suggest that characterizations of the movement as more insular may require revision.

Finally, perhaps one of the most difficult and controversial topics addressed within the literature on the media reform movement involves the assessment of the extent to which the movement has been successful in its activities. Certainly, critiques such as those outlined above

suggest that the media reform movement has not reached its full potential in terms of its ability to create institutional change. Nonetheless, throughout its history, the media reform movement has been attributed with a wide range of successes. The 1970s have been characterized as a particularly successful time period, when media reform organizations achieved success in the arenas of policymaking, industry influence, and viewer education (see Branscomb and Savage, 1978 and Hanks & Pickett, 1979, for a detailed review).<sup>32</sup> Chester (2006) documents a broad array of movement successes dating from the 1960s through the present. Specific actions such as the creation of Low Power FM radio and the defeat of the FCC's 2003 effort to relax media ownership rules are some recent examples of what are widely considered successes of the movement (Chester, 2007).

However, other analyses have reached starkly different conclusions (see, e.g., Cantor & Cantor, 1986). Rowland (1982), for instance, describes the media reform movement's record throughout the 1970s as "mixed and uneven," (p. 34), arguing that the movement's impact during this time was constrained by the policymaking process in which its activities focused, that the movement was not able to keep pace with technological and institutional change, and that it failed to generate a "clear, broad-based national constituency nor any form of organization consistently capable of helping translate their criticisms into comprehensive political action" (p. 36). At best, according to Rowland (1982), "the reform movement has succeeded to date in nudging the policymaking and regulatory process only a degree or two off course" (p. 36), due in large part to the movement's willingness to press for change within – rather than outside of – established institutional channels. More recent analyses have adopted a similar perspective (e.g., Hamilton, 2004; Hintz, 2007; Jakubowicz, 1993; Mueller, Kuerbis, & Page, 2004), including within narrower reform contexts such as the Chicano media reform movement (Maxwell, 1988;

Noriega, 2000). The underlying sentiment of many of these analyses is that the media reform movement seldom has been as radical as it needs to be to successfully initiate significant institutional change.

A common related critique has been that throughout much of its history and throughout its many international incarnations, the movement has taken a primarily defensive stance, often advocating preservation of the status quo in the face of potentially substantial deregulatory initiatives, rather than developing and advocating original policy alternatives (McChesney & Nichols, 2002; Mueller, Kuerbis, & Page, 2004; O'Siochru, 2004). A recent assessment of the legal needs of media reform organizations characterized the movement as "largely reactive," but concluded that with greater legal support, could "begin thinking strategically about how to proceed proactively" (Trivedi, 2006, pp. 32-33).<sup>33</sup>

The ability of the media reform movement to be more proactive in its efforts must also be considered against a backdrop in which there have been a series of developments over the past 30 years that have effectively recast the dynamics of the policymaking process in ways that work against media reform activities. Thus, for instance, in the wake of substantial media reform influence on broadcast license renewals, the FCC altered the process in ways that effectively insulate broadcasters from the license renewal challenges that were a defining component of the media reform movement in the 1960s and 1970s (Levi, 1996).<sup>34</sup> A wide range of deregulatory initiatives that have characterized much of the past 30 years of communications policymaking (see Horwitz, 1989) effectively transfer decision-making from government to private parties, thereby undermining many of the traditional channels of influence utilized by public interest organizations (see Montgomery, 1989). Chester (2007) cites the "loss of regulatory leverage at



the FCC” that resulted from deregulation as one of the key factors contributing to the decline of the media reform movement in the 1980s and 1990s (p. 103). As Toro (2000) notes:

The decline of public participation was not merely an unanticipated byproduct of deregulation. . . . deregulation at the Federal Communications Commission can be attributed to the strong reaction that the broadcast industry and the Commission had to the new ‘public participation era.’ Ironically, the FCC used public participation as a justification for the elimination of regulations that public participants thought it so important to enforce. The Commission argued that it no longer needed so many regulations, because it could rely on citizens to monitor broadcasters and report problems to the Commission.” (p. 316)

However, at the same time that these kinds of monitoring functions have been ceded to the citizenry, policymakers also have largely withdrawn from gathering much of the information necessary to make such monitoring possible (Napoli & Seaton, 2007). Indeed, a key component of the deregulatory process has included a reduction in the information reporting obligations of the regulated industries and the information gathering activities of the regulatory agencies (see Napoli & Karaganis, 2007). This creates a paradoxical situation that has been well-described by Andrew Schwartzman of the Media Access Project: “When the agency deregulates, and stops collecting data, they say ‘we’re going to rely on marketplace forces and public complaints to make us aware of problems.’ . . . [However, the lack of available data] takes away the means of members of the public to do that monitoring” (quoted in Dunbar, 2003).

Focusing also on the deregulatory process, Mueller, Kuerbis, and Page (2004) argue that the transition in the 1980s and the 1990s toward telecommunications liberalization, and its

associated emphasis on the benefits of deregulation and the primacy of economic analysis meant that “media activists who were focused more on culture and content had a difficult time participating in this dialogue” (p. 57), which contributed to the marginalization of these groups during this time period.<sup>35</sup> More recently, we have seen similar observations within the context of WSIS, in which, Franklin (2005) argues, grassroots media/ICT activist groups – particularly those concerned with gender issues – found themselves marginalized as a result of the “‘hard-nosed’ techno-economic and hi-tech” formulations of the key issues and problems to be addressed by WSIS (p. 40).

Assessing the effectiveness of any social movement is complicated by the question of where the analyst is looking when he/she looks for success or influence on the policymaking process. It may often be the case that influence has taken place in areas other than the final decision outcome for a particular policy issue. In a 70s-era analysis of the media reform movement, Chisman (1977) concludes that citizens’ groups can have their greatest potential for influence in the early stages of the policymaking process, when issues are in their infancy. Similarly, in an analysis of 1990s-era advocacy surrounding the development of the National Information Infrastructure in the U.S., Munn (1999) concludes that the media reform movement achieved its greatest success in redefining how the policy issues were framed (in this case, successfully foregrounding issues of access). Research by Bauer, et al. (2005) found that media reform organizations play a critical role in introducing research and ideas generated in the academic sector into the policymaking process.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to provide a detailed review and synthesis of the academic literature on the media reform movement. As this review has illustrated, previous

characterizations of this literature as sparse seem less appropriate when the parameters of the movement are defined broadly (both geographically and conceptually) and when the very recent surge of research on this topic is taken into consideration. As this review also has shown, it has become increasingly common for researchers to approach media reform from the perspective of social movement theory, a phenomenon that may reflect the increased recognition of media reform as a distinctive social movement, or that may reflect an alteration of the self-perceptions of the academics/activists within the movement, who also generate much of the scholarship about the movement.

### **Recommendations**

In any case, approaching media reform within the context of social movements helps to identify a number of key themes. The first involves the linkage between media reform and other social movements. Social movement researchers have emphasized that while all social movements seek to alter media behavior in the pursuit of broader social objectives, media reform is unique in that the alteration of media is both a means and ends for the movement. Thus, the ends of media reform are, in many ways, part of the means of other social movements. The goals of media reform in many ways provide the communications environment that is fundamental to the growth and development of other social movements.

How should this relationship impact the organization and conduct of the media reform movement? Should it remain ancillary to other social movements or should it operate under the assumption that a distinctive independent identity can – and in fact must – be achieved for the movement to be successful? Or does this latter perspective overstate the prominence that media issues could ever achieve in the broader socio-political environment, particularly one in which garnering mainstream media coverage may be uniquely difficult?

In light of the evidence to date, which suggests that other social movements are not inclined to consistently and systematically devote meaningful resources and attention to media reform, and in light of the extent to which media and communications technologies and industries have developed into a central dimension of global economic and political life, it would seem that, moving forward, the more appropriate strategy would be to continue to work to solidify and expand media reform as a free standing social movement, while being opportunistic in regard to potential linkages with other movements. Dependence upon the ebb and flow of the energies, issues, and resources of other social movements puts media reform in a position of dependence and subservience that makes it unlikely to be able to respond effectively to the largely independent ebb and flow of policy issues and citizen attention in the media and communications arena. Moreover, the continued development and effectiveness of alternative communication channels such as the Internet undermine the extent to which other social movements are likely to see media reform as central to their needs. At the same time, these alternative communication channels enhance the extent to which media reform can cultivate the necessary constituency to function as a free-standing social movement without significant mainstream media coverage. And finally, it would seem that the contemporary political-economic environment is one in which issues pertaining to media and communications policy are becoming increasingly – and recognizably – central to the economic, political, and cultural life of the citizenry – more so than was the case in years past. Thus, the contemporary Information Society would seem to represent an environment in which media reform should be more capable, and, as the past 5-10 years would suggest, is more capable of standing independently as a social movement worthy of the attention, support, and commitment of the citizenry – though certainly

one with underlying motivations that trace very tangibly back to issues of civil rights in many cases.

The second major dimension of the media reform movement that is highlighted via a social movement perspective involves organizational cooperation and collaboration, particularly in relation to the relationship between grassroots activist groups and federal-level advocacy organizations. This tendency toward fragmentation and independent operation has characterized assessments of the movement from its earliest days to the present. Early scholarship examining the media reform movement in fact identifies as much fragmentation back then as characterizes the movement today (Schneyer & Lloyd, 1976). Hackett and Carroll's (2006) observation that the media reform movement possesses an "organizational ecology with distinct niches" (p. 65) seems to be a persistent characteristic of the movement.

With these observations in mind, it would seem at this point particularly important to move away from considering how best to alleviate the persistent disjuncture between national organizations and grassroots organizations, as well as the tendency toward organizational fragmentation within the field, and instead focus on possible strategic approaches to making these characteristics sources of strength for the movement. That is, how best can the movement capitalize on the different skill sets and areas of expertise that the diverse participants in the movement bring to the table and on the opportunities for specialization in knowledge and skill sets that presumably arise from the maintenance of distinct divisions between federal and local level activities? As recent research by Brinson (2007) suggests, significant policy change can be achieved even when the grassroots activists and federal-level advocacy organizations operate with only loose coordination of efforts. Hackett and Carroll (2006) emphasize how the movement could benefit from a better-coordinated division of labor, something that presumably

could be achieved even if the grassroots and federal levels of the movement remain fairly independent. Perhaps the emphasis in the future should be on the creation of liaison-type organizations focused primarily on coordination and communication across levels of activity, thereby freeing the grassroots- and federal-level organizations from having to try to engage in such tasks.

### **Future Research**

Despite the depth and scope of the existing research on the media reform movement, there are some avenues of inquiry still needing to be pursued. Perhaps the most pressing is research of a long-term nature that seeks to track and assess media reform movement activities and organizations over a long period of time, with a particular eye on assessing the strategies, tactics, and organizational structures that appear most closely related effecting institutional change. As far back as 1979, Hanks and Pickett advocated for longitudinal research examining long-range effectiveness and seeking to “isolate the factors best predictive of change” (p. 105). Unfortunately, other than a few recent exceptions (e.g., Mueller, Page, & Kuerbis, 2004), we are, 30 years later, still in need of research in this vein, and calls for work of this type persist (see Mueller & Lentz, 2004). To the extent that a number of critical analyses of the media reform movement have emphasized a relative lack of long-term change versus short-term change (see, e.g., Hanks & Pickett, 1979; Rowland, 1982), research in this vein may prove to be particularly valuable in strengthening the long-term success of the movement.

Of particular value of research in this vein would be studies examining issues and time periods that have yet to receive meaningful scholarly attention. That is, there has been a tendency for academic research to cluster around a few key issues or time periods, most notably the media reform movement’s origins and heyday in the 1960s and 1970s surrounding broadcast

television, its revitalization in the wake of the policy debates surrounding LPFM, and media ownership, and its increasingly global orientation in the wake of the formation of WSIS and ICANN. Such tendencies have meant that other significant periods of public interest and advocacy organization activity, such as those surrounding the break-up of AT&T, or the rise, fall, and rise again of cable television regulation, have not been featured prominently in the literature gathered for this review. This review has illustrated fairly clearly that there has been a much greater emphasis on public interest activism in the mass media sector, as opposed to the telecommunications sector. This tendency may reflect researchers' perceptions of telecommunications-related activism as part of the broader consumer movement (see Rhodes, 2006), and thus being more reflective of traditional economic regulation, rather than reflective of the social regulation issues and concerns that have better characterized the areas of emphasis of the media reform movement. Unfortunately, within scholarship on the consumer movement, telecommunications-related activities have been, according to Schiller (2007), "little studied" (p. 19), and thus seems to have slipped through the cracks between different academic points of focus. Clearly, then, there is a need for more research that explores activism in the telecom-sector through a media reform lens (see, e.g., Schiller, 1999, 2007). There may be a number of reasons for the existence of such gaps in the literature, ranging from the differing tendencies of those involved in different policy issues to self-generate scholarship; to variations in the availability of the types of information sources (individuals, primary documents, etc.) necessary to conduct scholarly research; to the ebbs and flows within the academic community in regards the perceived resonance and significance of different research topics.

The bigger issue in this particular case, however, may relate back to the relationship between media reform and social movements. Specifically, scholars appear to have been much

more likely to conceptualize media reform as an outgrowth of the civil rights movement than to have conceptualized media reform as an outgrowth of the consumer movement (for exceptions, see Fratkin, 2002; Newman, 2002) – a movement that also has frequently provided a strong frame of reference, motivating logic, and energy and expertise, to the cause of media reform. As a result, those issues and organizations involving topics related to media and social justice or media and the democratic process have received much more scholarly attention at this point than those related to less political charged issues related to media and consumer choice or consumer rights. This pattern perhaps reflects the kinds of topics more likely to attract those scholars with an interest in media reform, for whom issues related to social justice and the democratic process may resonate more strongly.<sup>36</sup> Whatever the reason, it would certainly seem that there is a need, from a social movement scholarship standpoint, to better investigate and document the role and influence of the consumer movement on media reform to the same extent that has been accomplished for the civil rights movement.

More work also needs to be done in developing a sufficiently inclusive inventory of the indicators of success or institutional change for the movement. As was discussed previously, a social movement's influence can occur at a variety of levels, and further inquiry into how these various avenues of influence can best be identified would be helpful in providing a more well-rounded assessment of the media reform movement's impact.

Research also needs to examine more extensively other social movements (civil rights, the environment, etc.) in an effort to develop a more detailed assessment of exactly where media reform stands within their hierarchy of their perceived needs in order to effect their desired institutional change. It may very well be that perceptions within the media reform movement of the centrality of media to other social movements, and even the theoretical centrality of media



reform to the effectiveness of other social movements, do not correspond with the practical realities to be found if the perceived importance of media reform within these other social movements is thoroughly investigated. Such research is necessary to determine if, when, and to what extent the linking of media reform with other social movements is an appropriate long-term strategy for the movement to pursue.

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<sup>1</sup> The scholarly neglect of public interest activism in the telecommunications sector may be a result of the tendency to treat key mobilizing telecommunications issues such as rates and access as issues characteristic of the broader consumer movement (see Rhodes, 2006). Schiller (2007) has characterized consumer movements in the telecommunications sector as “little-studied” (p. 19).

<sup>2</sup> Often, available electronic databases do not extend particularly far back in time, which makes the bibliographies of published studies a key mechanism for locating older work.

<sup>3</sup> For a thorough recent study of the media reform/media democratization movement in both the U.S. and abroad, see Hackett and Carroll (2006).

<sup>4</sup> Dichter (2005) recounts the rise and fall of other organizations involved in the media reform movement in the 1990s, including the Telecommunications Policy Roundtable and Videazimut.

<sup>5</sup> For a more recent effort to impose an environmental frame on communications policy, see Boyle’s (1997) approach to intellectual property law and policy as analogous to the environmental movement – only focused on the Internet environment. Well-known media reform advocates Robert McChesney and John Nichols (2002) similarly have drawn parallels to the environmental movement, arguing that media reformers have much to learn from the strategies and tactics that have contributed to its growth.

<sup>6</sup> As O’Siochru (2005) notes, “framing the issue is difficult in transnational context since diverse cultural, political, and economic circumstances must be addressed” (p. 297).

<sup>7</sup> Wible (2004) argues for the importance of advocates for structural change and advocates for content change to “link more directly” (p. 43).

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed discussion of the various conceptualizations of alternative/independent media, see Hamilton (2001).

<sup>9</sup> McChesney and Nichols (2002), for instance, advise against focusing exclusively on alternative media, arguing that “there are inherent limitations to what can be done with independent media, even with access to the Internet. Too often, the alternative media remain on the margins, seemingly confirming that commercial media conglomerates have become so massive because they ‘give the people what they want.’ The problem with this disconnect is that it suggests that corporate media have mastered the marketplace on the basis of their wit and wisdom. In fact . . . our media system is not the legitimate result of free market competition . . .” (p. 123). Chester (2006), in contrast, sees efforts to reform traditional mainstream media as largely unsuccessful, emphasizing instead the importance of “parallel efforts . . . to give the public more access to the airwaves, so that they might create their *own* public interest programming” (p. 6).

<sup>10</sup> For an overview and assessment of advocacy groups’ efforts to influence broadcast content via boycotts, see Fahey (1991).

<sup>11</sup> A recent assessment of the advocacy work of the Latino community (Wible, 2004) concluded that the institutional and philosophical changes that have taken place in the policymaking sector require that advocates focus their efforts on appealing to the economic logic of the industries at issue, rather than pursuing institutional change via the policymaking process.

<sup>12</sup> As Fratkin (2002) notes, 342 petitions to deny broadcast license renewals were filed in the period from 1971 to 1973 alone. For a detailed study of the role of women’s groups in license renewal challenges, see Lewis (1986).

<sup>13</sup> This observation comes from discussions with colleagues in the political science field who have noted being discouraged from studying media issues during their academic training due to the subject’s perceived trivial nature. It also has been noted (see Napoli, 2006) that communications and media policy curricula are virtually non-existent in public policy programs within U.S. universities.

<sup>14</sup> According to Rubin (2002), “The single most important media victory in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was *United Church of Christ vs. FCC*, a case which gave the modern media reform movement its birth” (p. 2).

<sup>15</sup> For an internationally-focused historical analysis of early iterations of the media reform movement, see Pike and Winseck (2004).

<sup>16</sup> See Fratkin (2002) for a chronicle of the rise and decline of one of the most significant national media reform organizations during this time period, the National Citizens Committee for Broadcasting, founded and led by former FCC Commissioner Nicholas Johnson (see also Johnson, 1967).

<sup>17</sup> As Thomas (2006) notes, organizational survival in the media reform field is difficult “in a context in which funding priorities change constantly. New media funding preferences often result in the marginalization of old media projects” (p. 306). Kopp (1997) illustrates how funding for public interest/advocacy work in the media and communications policy field has historically been confined to very few large foundations (e.g., Ford and

Rockefeller); thus, when funding priorities at these organizations changed, opportunities for the continued growth and development of the media reform movement largely dried up.

<sup>18</sup> McChesney (2004) credits the Telecommunications Act of 1996 with “fan[ning] the flames of this burgeoning movement” (p. 255).

<sup>19</sup> According to McChesney (2003), as a result of LPFM process, “Media reform activists learned that organizing around tangible reform proposals could generate popular support and sustained attention on Capitol Hill” (p. 225). For a history of “micro-radio” in its various permutations (e.g., Class D, LPFM), see Stavitsky, Avery, & Vanhala (2001).

<sup>20</sup> For an historical overview of the “waves of media democratization” from 1965 through 2005, see Hackett and Carroll (2006, pp. 92-97). For an historical analysis of a largely unstudied component of 1990s-era media reform – the free air time for political candidates campaign initiated by the Alliance for Better Campaigns, see Mason (2006).

<sup>21</sup> For additional research examining the role of labor in the establishment of alternative media, see Tracy’s (2007) historical case study of *The Dubuque Leader* newspaper in the 1930s.

<sup>22</sup> For an alternative perspective, see Foley (2005), who argues that the Newspaper Guild – Communication Workers of America (CWA) “has been one of the most enduring and effective media reform organizations in the United States” (p. 41).

<sup>23</sup> A 2003/2004 study by Charles Layton published in the *American Journalism Review* documented how the mainstream news media provided virtually no news coverage of the FCC’s 2002/2003 reassessment of its media ownership rules.

<sup>24</sup> As Hackett and Carroll (2006) note, the liberal foundations that historically have provided the backbone of support for the media reform movement “tend to fund specific projects rather than supply ongoing operating funds, forcing activist groups to invest substantial time in generating and writing grant proposals. By contrast, wealthy conservative foundations have invested in long-term institution building” (p. 131). Fratkin (2002) illustrates this tendency in her study of the National Citizens Committee for Broadcasting, which was unable to maintain support from the Marke Foundation because the foundation believed that the NCCB would be unable to broaden its base of support, from the Stern Foundation because, according to one source “they never stick with anything too long,” and from the ARCA Foundation because the NCCB represented a long-term commitment that the foundation lacked the patience to support absent seeing immediate short-term results (p. 173). Similarly, Kopp (1997) asserts that the Ford Foundation’s support for media reform organizations has been “short-term action and results oriented” (p. 191).

<sup>25</sup> For discussions of the role of private foundations in communications policymaking, see Brown (1986), Kopp (1997), and Lenert (2003).

<sup>26</sup> According to issue niche theory, interest groups “cultivate specific recognizable identities . . . by concentrating on very narrow issues” and refraining from imposing on the similarly narrow issue spaces carved out by other interest groups (Browne, 1990, p. 472). For a critique of issue niche theory, see Heaney (2007).

<sup>27</sup> However, it would also seem possible that *increases* in available funding in a particular sector (as has been happening in the media reform area; see Louie & Luckey, 2006) also can contribute to fragmentation, as a greater quantity and variety of available funders may result in a greater diversity of specific interests being supported. Such a tendency may then reflect the need for significant collaboration and coordination among funders.

<sup>28</sup> Hackett and Carroll (2006), for instance, illustrate the tendency among some sectors of the media reform movement to criticize the efforts of those who focus primarily on structural media reform.

<sup>29</sup> In Sherman’s (2004) interviews with members of public interest/advocacy organizations that focus on communications policy, she finds that they give the public an average grade of D in their knowledge of policy issues (p. 131). Of course, such low levels of knowledge likely are at least in part a function of the demonstrated tendency of the mainstream media to avoid coverage of communications and media policy issues.

<sup>30</sup> For a discussion of the importance of public participation in the communications policymaking process, see Raboy (1994).

<sup>31</sup> Heaney (2007) argues that interest groups often need to employ a “representation strategy,” in which the organization grounds its identity in its ability to facilitate a connection between policymakers and a broad constituency (p. 281).

<sup>32</sup> For a similar review of the successes of the Communications Rights for the Information Society movement, see Thomas (2005).

<sup>33</sup> This conclusion should be tempered by the fact that the sponsoring organization for the study was seeking financial support specifically to provide legal support to the media reform community.

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<sup>34</sup> As Levi (1996) illustrates, the Telecommunications Act of 1996 essentially eliminated the traditional comparative renewal hearing for broadcast licenses, while also extending the license term to eight years – actions that can be seen as specific efforts to insulate licensees from the external pressures of media reform organizations.

<sup>35</sup> Kopp (1997) credits the Markle Foundation with playing a very influential role, via its funding decisions, in shifting the parameters of communications policy debates heavily in favor of marketplace paradigms. Simone (2006) documents how policymakers' increasingly economic orientation in their interpretation of the "public interest" standard with the interpretations employed by members of the media reform movement.

<sup>36</sup> When scholars have focused on the role of the consumer movement in the media/communications realm, they often have focused on issues of advertising regulation (see, e.g., Ryans, Samiee, & Wills, 2002; Stole, 2000) – issues that have, for whatever reason, tended to reside at the periphery of the media reform movement.