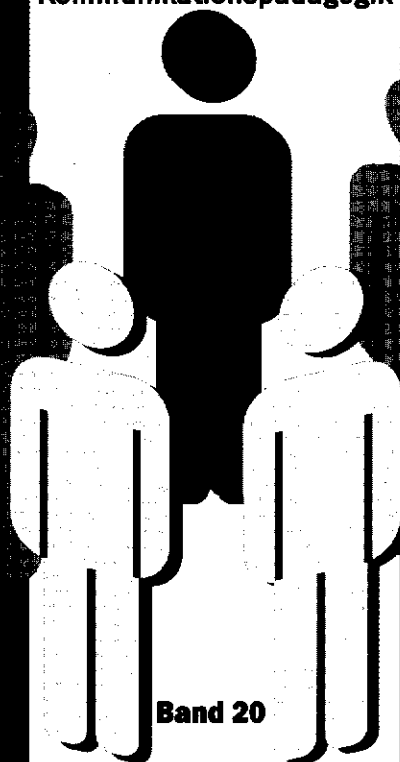


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# Communication and Political Change

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## Social Movements, the News Media and Political Change

This paper examines a seeming paradox. Contemporary research within cultural studies or critical media studies repeatedly has underscored the news media's role in maintaining the legitimacy of those who hold political and economic power, while simultaneously emphasizing how news organizations denigrate social movements that challenge the established social order (see, for example, Gitlin 1980). American history, however, is replete with examples of social movements that effectively challenged centers of institutional power and, in so doing, stimulated meaningful social and political change. By examining this seeming paradox, I hope to contribute to a more developed understanding of the interaction between social movements and the news media.

I begin with a brief discussion of how communication researchers, especially within cultural studies, have defined the mass media's ideological role. Particular attention is devoted to how past scholarship has defined the interaction between the news media and social movements. Following this examination, I provide a discussion of specific contexts and conditions in which social movements are able to influence news discourse and secure political change. The American civil rights movement is used to illustrate these contexts and conditions. I conclude by advancing a revised perspective on movement-media interaction, a perspective designed to provide a more adequate conceptualization of this interaction. The interaction between social movements and the news media raises central concerns, including the news media's relationship to political authority and

the character of news coverage focusing on challengers who demand social and political change.

### Cultural Studies and the News Media's Ideological Role

It has become a commonplace within cultural studies scholarship to highlight the news media's role in sustaining the political and economic power of elites within contemporary capitalist societies. Although many studies have noted the news media's contribution to the construction of meaning, researchers within cultural studies have argued that journalistic constructions of reality reinforce the existing political and social order; in this view, news organizations, as agencies of social control, routinely denigrate and inhibit dissent (Hall 1979; Hallin 1987). News stories as symbolic accounts provide the public with definitions of social and political realities. According to scholarship within cultural studies, these definitions are largely in keeping with the meanings, values and interests of powerful institutions and groups in society.

Multiple studies have explored the relationship between the news media and the social order by examining the character of news reporting concerning alternative movements. In his very influential study of coverage of the New Left by *The New York Times* and CBS News, Gitlin (1980) argues that these news organizations delegitimized the student movement through a variety of framing devices. Shoemaker (1984, 72) provides "some support to the theory that the media act as agents of social stability" in her analysis of news stories concerning eleven American political groups. Other studies have advanced similar findings regarding the ideological character of news reporting on the women's movement.

Many critical analyses of the news media's ideological "work" have relied on Gramsci's concept of hegemony (1971) as a central theoretical construct (Carragee 1991; Gitlin 1980; Hall 1980; Hallin 1987). Within these studies, hegemony refers to the processes by which ruling classes and groups shape popular consent through the production and diffusion of meanings and values by the major ideological institutions in a society, including the news media. In their sensitive interpretations of Gramsci's work, Hall (1980) and Williams (1977) stress the complex, contradictory and evolving character of hegemonic ideology. Hall (1980, 36), for example, writes that "[f]or Gramsci, 'hegemony' is never a permanent state of affairs and never uncontested."

### Evaluating the Cultural Studies Perspective on the News Media's Ideological Role

Scholarship within cultural studies certainly has enriched our understanding of the relationship between news and ideology. By examining the news media's signification processes, studies within this tradition have underscored the media's central role in the production of meanings and values within society. With its attention to questions of social and political power, this scholarship also has addressed issues that have frequently been neglected by mainstream social scientific perspectives on the media. Some studies have provided specific insights on the complexities of hegemonic processes by exploring media production processes or by examining the ways in which audience members accept or resist hegemonic meanings distributed by the news media. These are significant contributions and I find considerable value in cultural studies

perspectives on the relationship between the media and political authority; indeed, my own work has been influenced by this tradition in significant ways and I have tried to contribute to this tradition's development (see, for example, Carragee 1991, 1993).

Despite these contributions, a careful examination of cultural studies scholarship on the news media's ideological role raises a number of troubling issues. I will focus in particular on difficulties associated with research on the interaction between social movements and the news media, although many of the issues I will discuss can be related to a broader range of cultural studies scholarship.

Perhaps most significantly, some research in cultural studies presents an overly deterministic perspective on the interaction between social movements and the news media by its recurring emphasis on the ways in which the news media denigrate social movements challenging political authority. According to this perspective, the news media effectively limit the growth of alternative social movements and, in so doing, routinely prevent social and political change. Barker-Plummer (1996, 27) characterizes this as the "hard hegemony model" and she points to a number of its limitations, concluding that "the position that news media will inevitably marginalize 'real' criticism and incorporate all other kinds is simply too deterministic to accommodate the day-to-day complexity of movement-media relationships." This model neglects the fact that social movements at varied times in American history have helped to mobilize public support for meaningful change. Indeed, movements have at times made effective use of the news media as a political resource.

The limitations of the hard hegemony model are a product of a number of difficulties. Cultural studies scholarship has focused far more attention on the news media's definition of social movements than on the *interaction* between movements and the media. Taken alone, textual analyses of

reporting patterns are unable to shed light on how social movements attempt to influence news coverage. To put it another way, cultural studies research primarily has focused its attention on the signifying practices of the media, neglecting the ways in which movements create and distribute social and political meanings. This is odd shortcoming for a tradition of research with a fundamental interest in the social construction of meaning.

The hard hegemony model represents a fundamental misunderstanding and simplification of Gramsci's insights. In the hands of some, hegemony is reduced to the unproblematic distribution and acceptance of an integrated dominant ideology (for example, see Binder 1993; Dahlgren 1982). This mechanistic definition of hegemony neglects Gramsci's emphasis on ideological struggle and contestation. In keeping with this emphasis, Williams (1977, 112) points out that a "lived hegemony is always a process. It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended and modified. It also is continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own." I have provided a more extensive summary of how some researchers have simplified Gramsci's arguments (see Carragee 1993).

The strong hegemony model also provides a rather simplistic definition of social movements. Given its attention to how news stories define a movement, this model implies that particular movements have a singular identity or character. This neglects that a social movement, in the words of Gamson and Mayer (1996, 283), represents "a field of actors, not a unified entity." The self-identity of a movement, therefore, is a product of internal negotiation and conflict. The construction of movement identity occurs over time as movements evolve and adapt to changing political opportunities or constraints. This complex process is neglected by much of cultural studies research on movement-media interaction. This suggests the

need for particular caution in advancing claims about a singular, unified movement.

Finally, the strong hegemony model provides an overly determined view of journalists and their work given its almost exclusive focus on the economic and organizational constraints confronting reporters. These constraints, of course, are important and they do explain, in part, why news frequently perpetuates the political status quo. Nonetheless, journalists in many news organizations have a degree of autonomy. Their reporting is not simply determined by the organizational or economic pressures of journalistic work. At certain times, under certain conditions, journalists produce stories sympathetic to demands for meaningful change. For example, the Progressive Movement in early 20<sup>th</sup> century America was much sustained by the efforts of muckraking journalists who identified with this movement and shared some of its basic political and social goals.

I share Barker-Plummer's view (1996, 28) that the hard hegemony model needs to be replaced by a more contingent and contextual understanding of movement-media interaction. She points out that the interactions between social movements and the news media are "structured and complex, yet essentially indeterminate. That is, despite some recurring patterns in movement-media interactions, we cannot say that these interactions will always result in a particular outcome. Like other forms of communication, the movement-media dialog is basically open-ended. This vital openness makes news media a potential tool for social change."

## Movements and Political Change

Even a cursory examination of American history reveals multiple occasions where social movements secured significant political and social

reforms. These movement successes cast considerable doubt on cultural studies approaches which reduce the news media's complex role to the safeguarding of established centers of power. Using examples from only the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Progressive Movement secured important political and social reforms, including the direct election of senators, the establishment of federal regulatory agencies and increased governmental oversight of big business. Similarly, the feminist movement gained greater political and economic power for women, while simultaneously altering the American legal system so that it offered greater protections for women. Thus, for example, the feminist movement identified, indeed named, sexual harassment as a social problem that needed legal redress.

The modern environmental movement also realized some of its goals by mobilizing public support for a greatly expanded governmental effort to relieve pressing ecological problems.

The relationship between these movements and the news media was and, in some cases, is complex. Research indicates that some news organizations at some points provided respectful treatment of these movements and their aims. For example, Barker-Plummer (1996) and Tuchman (1978) provide impressive evidence that the feminist movement at times made skillful use of the news media to advance its political and social objectives.

A compelling research need is to further identify the contexts and conditions which contribute to or detract from the ability of social movements to secure political change. Cultural studies scholarship on movement-media interaction has not significantly contributed to identifying these contexts and conditions. Sociological research on social movements, including scholarship on movement-media interaction, has provided insight on these concerns. I will first sketch a number of insights derived from this research and then illustrate these insights by discussing the strategies and



tactics of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, including this movement's successful effort to influence news coverage of its struggle. The experience of this movement indicates that the news media under certain conditions can be tools for meaningful social and political change.

Sociological research on social movements has identified a number of factors that are central to the ability of social movements to secure political change. I will focus on three of these factors: the ability of movements to recognize and seize upon moments of political opportunity; the degree to which movements have effective mobilizing structures; and the ability of movements to engage in strategic framing processes to attract news coverage and influence its character and, therefore, mobilize public support.

Social, economic or political grievances alone do not fully account for the emergence of a social movement and its growth. Marginalized groups often confront substantive political, economic and social problems without seeking a redress of these problems through collective action. Similarly, these problems may stimulate the emergence of collective efforts at change, but these efforts often fall far short of mobilizing large numbers of people to join a social movement seeking to secure change. The emergence and growth of social movements, then, is tied to social and political contexts that provide opportunities for the evolution of collective action. Political opportunities open or close for social movements and the ability to recognize and seize moments of political opportunity are central to the emergence and growth of movements.

The existence of moments of political opportunity is but one factor that influences the emergence and growth of movements. According to resource mobilization theory, the emergence of collective action also depends on complex organizational structures and forms of communication. Movements arise in conflicts where activists have a combination of

political opportunity and pre-existing structures and institutions from which to operate (Gamson 1990). Within any given institution, according to resource mobilization theorists, there is a center of power where the establishment largely controls resources, rules, and the ability to make meaning. As opportunities arise, through particular events or a broad social change, for example, a particular institution is weakened and challengers gain the ability to have an influence.

The ability of social movements to mobilize support and secure change also depends on the effectiveness of the framing strategies employed by movement activists.

Framing involves the definition of issues and events through patterns of selection, emphasis, interpretation, and exclusion. Gamson and Modigliani (1989, 3) define a frame as a “central organizing idea [...] for making sense of relevant events, suggesting what is at issue.” Social movements, along with other political actors, sponsor frames both in an effort to attract favorable news coverage and to mobilize public support.

News stories, then, become a significant forum for framing contests in which political actors compete by sponsoring their preferred definitions of issues and events. The ability of a frame to dominate news discourse and other discourses depends on a variety of complex factors, including its sponsor’s economic and cultural resources, its sponsor’s knowledge of journalistic routines and practices, and a frame’s resonance with broader political values or tendencies. Past research indicates that framing contests frequently favor political elites given the routine practices of American journalism and given the significance of resources in the successful sponsoring of frames (Gamson 1992; Ryan 1991). While movements do encounter difficulties in shaping news coverage, they do, at times, frame issues and events in skillful ways and, in so doing, shape both journalistic definitions and public understandings of these issues and events.

The sponsorship of collective action frames is particularly important for social movements because these frames encourage political activism and civic engagement. Gamson (1992) identified three components of these frame: an injustice component (an identification of harm produced by human action); an agency component (a belief that it is possible to change conditions through collective action); and an identity component (the identification of a specific adversary). Collective action frames are central to meaning-construction within movements.

An examination of the American civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly the efforts of Martin Luther King, Jr. and his Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), illustrates how a particular movement identified and seized particular political opportunities, possessed internal mobilizing structures that sustained its activism, and engaged in sophisticated framing strategies to influence news coverage, mobilize support and secure its goals. I will devote much more attention to framing strategies given their crucial significance in the interaction between the civil rights movement and the news media. While a detailed examination of these issues is beyond the scope of this paper, a sketch of these concerns reveals the weaknesses of the hard hegemony model, including its view that the news media invariably sustain dominant ideological meanings and denigrate alternative movements.

While formidable obstacles still confronted the civil rights movement by the mid-1950s and early 1960s, this period still represented a time of enhanced political opportunity for collective action. The movement, for example, could profit from the increased tension within the Democratic party between its segregationist Southern wing and Northern liberals. The integration of the American military and the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) declaring educational segregation unconstitutional represented substantive, albeit historically belated, federal

interventions in securing greater rights for blacks. Moreover, the election of John F. Kennedy in 1960 raised hopes for a more activist federal approach to civil rights. Finally, an expanding interest in the civil rights struggle by some segments of white America, including student and labor groups, provided black activists with increased opportunities for coalitions. All of these factors enhanced political opportunities for the civil rights movement.

By the mid-1950s, the black civil rights movement also had developed extensive institutional and social networks to sustain its activism. In his analysis of the civil rights movement, Morris (1984, 282) argues that “[t]he basic resources enabling a dominated group to engage in sustained protest are well-developed internal social institutions and organizations that provide the community with encompassing communication networks, organized groups, experienced leaders, and social resources, including money, labor, and charisma, that can be mobilized to attain collective goals.” Institutional and social networks, often linked to African-American churches and colleges, served as important mobilizing structures for the civil rights movement.

McAdam (1996) provides impressive evidence that the framing strategies employed by Martin Luther King, Jr. and the SCLC succeeded in attracting favorable news coverage, mobilizing public support and influencing public policy. The ability of the movement to secure these goals reflected the skill and complexity of its framing of events and issues.

The movement’s ability to secure news coverage was rooted in several factors. King and the SCLC recognized the effectiveness of staging disruptive actions, including boycotts and demonstrations, to attract news coverage. Disruptions of the public order meet the requirement of newsworthiness given the conflict between a challenging group and governmental authorities. The success of the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955-1956 convinced King and his associates that the use of civil

disobedience to disrupt the public order was an essential means to secure the related goals of attracting news attention and obtaining reforms.

As many social movements have learned, attracting news attention does not necessarily mean shaping coverage in ways consistent with a movement's self-definition and goals. King and the SCLC, however, employed frames that clearly resonated with American political and social experience and, in so doing, attracted sympathetic news coverage and public support. King's rhetoric mixed familiar themes from Christianity with values derived from traditional democratic theory, while simultaneously emphasizing the philosophy of nonviolence. Its multi-thematic character appealed to multiple publics, bridging, for example, the gap between secular liberals and those committed to religious values. King's skillful evocation of American political principles derived from the Constitution and Declaration of Independence linked the civil rights movement to these principles, making it difficult for opponents of civil rights to divorce the movement from mainstream American values.

Finally, King and the SCLC had "a genius for strategic dramaturgy" (McAdam 1996, 348); that is, the movement used strategic actions to define itself and its adversaries through compelling dramas. The staging of these actions was an important element in the movement's framing strategies. For example, King strategically selected Birmingham, Alabama as the site for a civil rights campaign in 1963 because of the likely violent reaction of its Commissioner of Public Safety, "Bull" Connor. Indeed, the police reacted violently to the movement's civil disobedience, producing vivid scenes of peaceful demonstrators being mauled by attack dogs and injured by the force of water produced by fire hoses. McAdam (1996, 349) concludes that these scenes defined movement activists as "peaceful Christian petitioners, being martyred by an evil, oppressive system. The stark, highly dramatic nature of this ritualized confrontation between good

and evil proved irresistible to the media and, in turn, to the American people.”

The strategies and tactics of King and his associates in the SCLC produced extensive news media coverage of the civil rights movement; much of this coverage was sympathetic to the movement and its aims. This coverage helped to produce unprecedented public support for the struggle for black civil rights. In turn, the movement’s success in gaining both news attention and public support forced a political response. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, therefore, owed much to the interaction between the civil rights movement and the news media.

The experience of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s suggests that the news media can, at times, contribute to meaningful social and political change. More specifically, this experience suggests how social movements by seizing upon moments of political opportunity, by possessing significant mobilizing structures and by employing effective framing strategies are able to use the news media as a political resource.

## Conclusion

By highlighting the contexts and conditions in which social movements are able to both influence news discourse and secure substantive political change, this analysis suggests that cultural studies approaches focusing on American society often advance a deterministic and reductive definition of the news media’s role. To characterize the news media as ideological institutions that inevitably support and legitimize the existing structure of power in American society is to ignore specific historical moments when the news media helped to shape progressive social and political change.

This indicates the need to abandon the mechanistic definition of movement-media interaction advanced by the hard hegemony model.

As an alternative to this model, research should examine the complexities inherent in the interaction between social movements and the news media. This research needs to remain sensitive to the very real constraints confronting social movements that seek progressive social change; these constraints are embedded in the inequities in power and resources that characterize American society. This research also needs to recognize that powerful institutions and groups have far more access to news as a political resource than do marginalized communities and groups. Despite these significant constraints, social movements have the capacity to shape news discourse in significant ways and, in so doing, secure the political and social reforms they seek.

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