

TO: GEORGE GERBER

FROM: BOB HACKETT 604/291-3863

DRAFT ONLY

1/5

Applicant: Robert A. Hackett, Associate Professor, School of Communication. Tenure-track appointment, Sept. 1, 1990.

Co-applicant: None

Priority 1: This project meets the first and third criteria. Through the literature review and exploratory fieldwork, it is intended to enhance an application for an external SSHRC Research Grant in 1999. At the same time, this project itself should generate conference papers and a refereed journal article, and in that sense is free-standing.

Title: Democratizing the media: an emergent social movement?

Period: March 1, 1998 - August 31, 1999.

Ethics: Applied for.

Grant: \$4,999 requested, to cover about 75% **** of the pilot study's costs. The remaining funds will be secured elsewhere.

Objectives: To explore the nature and potential of emergent coalitions which aim to challenge or transform the corporate and commercial media, and to "democratize" the media by, for example, enhancing access for a broader range of voices. To what extent can such coalitions be considered a distinct social movement in their own right? How do they differ from other social movements? What are their prospects for success? While there is a considerable academic literature on both social movements and on media/democracy, the media democratization movement as such is virtually unexplored. This study should help to fill that gap.

Theory and Review:

This study has several major starting points:

1) Arguably, the news media in English-speaking industrialized liberal-democracies are predominantly subject to ideological and structural forces (such as commercialism, concentrated corporate ownership, and a problematic professional ethos of "objectivity") which in some respects have negative implications for the democratic values of participation, equality, choice, representative diversity, political efficacy, and civil/civic discourse.¹ From this frankly normative standpoint, as elaborated in some of my own previous work,² media reform looms large in any project of democratic renewal.

2) Media are a significant part of the environment for social movements, and there is a burgeoning literature on the media-movement relationship. Movements' orientation to media varies with a great many factors, such as their goals (reformist or transformative), their strategies (war of position or war of maneuver), their politics (redistribution, recognition or salvation), the extent of their institutionalization and internal division of labour, and the extent of their dependence on mass media for mobilization, political validation and enlargement of conflict scope.³ Nevertheless, most movements seeking to mobilize widespread and dispersed support for projects of political change have been influenced by the mass media at every stage of their trajectory: their emergence, maintenance and attainment of goals.⁴

3) There are indications that a new kind of social movement is emerging. By contrast with other movements which regard the media as at most a conduit for promoting their primary objectives, this new movement has as its primary goal the transformation of the media themselves. It is a correlate of the so-called "information society," in which the cultural terrain is saturated with mediated symbols, and in which media and other cultural resources are emerging as central sites of political contestation.

While this movement can be traced back to the "underground" papers of the 1960s and the debates over the New World Information Order in the 1970s, it has assumed a wider variety of forms (and, arguably, greater momentum) since the 1980s. These forms are local, national and international in scope. They include public access and "alternative" media, distribution networks for such media, media resource centres to support community organizing and political activism, media monitoring and "watchdog" institutes and journals, ad hoc campaigns intended to influence dominant media, policy advocacy groups concerned with communications issues, "professional" organizations and trade unions representing journalists and other media workers, and "culture jammers" who try to satirize and denaturalize the dominant media's representations.

Most interestingly though, we see organizations with an explicit and even broader mandate to build a movement to democratize the media. One of the earliest and most important of these organizations is the Campaign for Press & Broadcasting Freedom, founded in 1979 by British trade union and Labour party activists to develop policy and mobilize political support for media reform. A Canadian counterpart to CPBF was founded in 1996 by the Council of Canadians and media unions, in response to dramatically increased press concentration. In the U.S., the most important initiatives are the Media & Democracy Congress, spearheaded by the Institute for Alternative Journalism in San Francisco in 1996, and the Cultural Environment Movement, founded in 1991 by internationally renowned communication scholar George Gerbner. To date, apart from the political programs, minutes, etc. of these organizations themselves, there has been very little if any academic analysis of their nature and potential. The following questions seem to be especially salient:

* How can we usefully categorize the variety of initiatives which may be meaningfully considered 'media democratization'? For analytical and normative purposes, can "conservative" initiatives (which favour traditional values and/or the power of dominant groups seeking to reduce pressure from below) be distinguished from "progressive" ones (which challenge established power in the name of a vision of human emancipation or in the interests of currently subordinate groups)? Does progressive and conservative media activism share important similarities, e.g. common expectations of media performance, or are their political differences paralleled by fundamentally conflicting philosophies of communication? A taxonomy of media activism on political and other dimensions is needed to help generate hypotheses.

* What are the normative underpinning of progressive media activism? Does it explicitly or implicitly challenge journalism's

"regime of objectivity," or more broadly, the assumptions of market liberalism or even liberal-democracy? Does it prefigure a new and more democratic regime of communication -- and if so, what changes in media structure and policy are entailed? Does it challenge the logic of commercialism in the media and consumerism in the culture -- or is it an outgrowth of those very forces? Does it pose a serious challenge to established media, or (as Montgomery suggests)⁵ can the dominant media co-opt it and convert it into a form of useful feedback?

* What conditions and motivations lead to such media activism? Can we conceptualize media/communication as a social sphere which in itself can mobilize people to act collectively? Or is media activism necessarily linked to other (primary?) social, political and economic interests? Are the different forms of media activism, even within the progressive end of the spectrum, irreducibly fragmented and contradictory, or do potentially cohere into a cohesive social movement for media democratization?

In relation to my previous work on the peace movement and the media, news representations of protest, significant omissions in the news agenda, and the "regime of objectivity" in North American journalism, this study constitutes both a "natural" extension and a distinct departure. It takes my own and other scholars' work on the ideological characteristics of dominant news media as a starting point to explore the political space for building an alternative. Moreover, my own participation in media education and democratization projects, dating back to 1983, will inform this research. Here, the contacts (in Canada, Britain and the U.S.) and documentation I have begun to accumulate, particularly since my work with NewsWatch Canada since 1993, will be very helpful.

Methods & Time-Line:

This pilot study can only begin to address the above questions, focussing on the taxonomy and the normative dimensions. The methods entail review of the scholarly literature on social movements and media democratization in order to generate hypotheses, collection and analysis of movement documents (including those available electronically) and exploratory fieldwork (interviewing activists, searching archives) in two of the several cities where media activism is concentrated. The "scope" of the research is media democratization in anglophone Canada, as well as the two industrialized liberal-democracies with the greatest influence on Canada's media system -- the US and the UK. This comparative approach enables some limited assessment of whether common problems and goals are inflected by specific national contexts. I envisage the following stages:

- Spring 1998: Literature review, with help of RA; research on the background of organizations to be visited, as preparation for fieldwork.

- Summer 1998: Fieldwork in Vancouver (e.g. Guerrilla Media, Adbusters, Canadian Association for Media Education); visit to San Francisco (base of the IAJ, Media Alliance, Public Media Centre, and

many others); conduct and transcribe interviews; preliminary sorting of interview data

- Spring/Summer 1999: Visit to CPBF and other groups in London, UK; conduct interviews; complete analysis of material

Budget Rationale:

A minimal but realistic budget for this pilot study is \$7,000, for a part-time research assistant (to help with literature and document searches); return air fare to two cities; subsistence for 20 days of fieldwork to obtain documents and conduct interviews; clerical assistance for transcription of interviews. I am requesting the full \$4,999, to cover the highest priority items. The remainder would be made up through my Professional Development Allowance, one or two work-study positions, "piggy-backing" with a conference travel grant, and/or my personal resources (including flyer points for one air fare). Maximum flexibility between the categories of employment, materials and subsistence is requested (to respond to contingencies and opportunities to economize).

REFERENCES

1. Some leading examples of normative critiques of the media on these grounds include J. Curran, "Mass media and democracy revisited," in J. Curran & M. Gurevitch (eds.), *Mass media and society* (London: Edward Arnold, 1991), pp. 82-117; D. Kellner, *Television and the crisis of democracy* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990); J. Keane, *The media and democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991); P. Dahlgren, *Television and the public sphere* (Sage, 1995).
2. R. Hackett, "Remembering the audience: Notes on control, ideology and oppositional strategies in the news media," in R. Gruneau (ed.) *Popular cultures and political practices* (Garamond, 1988), pp. 83-100; R. Hackett & Y. Zhao, *Sustaining Democracy? Journalism and the Politics of Objectivity* (Garamond, 1997).
3. See, e.g. W.K. Carroll & R.S. Ratner, "Media strategies and political projects: A comparative study of social movements," paper submitted to *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 1997; W.A. Gamson & G. Wolfsfeld, "Movements and media as interacting systems," *The Annals of The American Academy of Political and Social Science* 528 (July 1993): 114-125.
4. R.B. Kielbowicz & C. Scherer, "The role of the press in the dynamics of social movements," *Research in Social Movements, Conflict and Change* vol. 9 (1986): 71-96.
5. K. Montgomery, *Target: Prime time: Advocacy groups and the struggle over entertainment television* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1989).