

A Media Theory of Movement Power

by David Karpf

When we talk about “the media,” we tend to envision the old media institutions that are giving way to new journalistic approaches and technologies. The same goes for activism: we look at today’s movements and find them lacking in comparison to the movements from the past, forgetting that movements evolve along with the media frameworks of their time. “When we lionize the tactics of social movements from a bygone era, we blind ourselves to the opportunities and potential presented by current media technologies,” writes Karpf. “Properly harnessed, these technologies allow large organizations to engage in analytic activism. Improperly harnessed, they can send civil society organizations down a crooked path that leads to prioritizing issues, campaigns, and tactics that are more *clickable* over those that are more *important*.”

Editors’ note: *Movement organizations are dealing with an increasingly varied media and technological landscape, and that requires our use of a different set of tools and strategies. This article, which is drawn (with some minor alterations) from David Karpf’s new book, Analytic Activism: Digital Listening and the New Political Strategy (Oxford University Press, 2016), provides a useful disruption of antiquated assumptions about the interfaces between movement and medium. We thank the author and Oxford University Press for their kind permission.*

WE OFTEN MAKE TWO MISTAKES with regard to the interaction of media institutions and political activism. First, we still frequently treat “the media” as a unitary, stable, and undifferentiated system. This was a defensible assumption in 1993, when William Gamson and Gadi Wolfsfeld wrote their authoritative treatment of the subject, “Movements and Media as Interacting Systems.” Gamson and Wolfsfeld demonstrated that “social movements need the media far more than the media need them.”¹ They did so by tracing the interests of social movements and of industrial media organizations that typified the broadcast news era. But in the decades that have elapsed since that classic work was published, the

media system has undergone a continuous series of upheavals.

We can no longer simply state that some protest actions are inherently more media-friendly or newsworthy than others. We now have to specify *which media* and *which news*. Protest tactics are made media-friendly when they align with dominant media technologies. They become newsworthy when they fit the norms, incentives, and routines of the major news organizations of the day. When we talk about the “media system,” we still largely have in mind the broadcast media institutions that dominated twentieth-century American politics—the nightly news and the daily paper in particular. Today, those broadcast institutions remain relevant, but they are also facing

new competitive pressures, adopting new journalistic routines, and making use of new media technologies. As Andrew Chadwick suggests, we have replaced the old media cycle with a new “political information cycle.”² Stories unfold differently in the political information cycle. Social media buzz helps to determine the mainstream news agenda. Partisan news sites highlight different stories to appeal to their niche audiences.³ If movements and media are interacting systems, then the dramatic changes to the media system must produce ripple effects that change the opportunity structure for social movements.

Second, we treat the media as though it were a *mirror*, held up to society and reflecting back the most important

or prominent issues of the day. The dominant theories of policy change in political science, in fact, have long tended to ignore the role and interests of media institutions.⁴ These theories draw empirical data from newspaper coverage, equating it with evidence of public opinion and public events. Media attention serves as a stand-in for public opinion in this tradition: if a topic makes the front page of the local paper or receives four minutes of coverage on the nightly news, we treat it as evidence of public interest and public will. As Susan Herbst demonstrates in *Reading Public Opinion*, both political activists and legislators treat the daily news agenda as evidence of public opinion.⁵

But a long research tradition maintains that media has *never* been merely a reflective technology. Kurt and Gladys Lang first offered this insight in their seminal 1953 study of the MacArthur Day parades: *media is a technology of refraction, not reflection*.⁶ Introduce television cameras into an event, and you will manufacture a public spectacle. People will behave differently, performing roles for the cameras. Place newspaper reporters or bloggers at that event, and you will reveal different elements of the same spectacle. Media coverage is not a neutral arbiter or reflection of objective reality. It documents a performance that it is helping to cocreate. As Gamson and Wolfsfeld put it, “A demonstration with no media coverage at all is a nonevent, unlikely to have any positive influence either on mobilizing followers or influencing the target. No news is bad news.”⁷ Successful protest events are strategically designed to attract coverage from the dominant media of the day. And as the media system changes, so too must our understanding of successful protest events.

To think clearly about the opportunities that the changing media system

presents to activist organizations, we must historically bracket successful movement tactics. Different media, dominant at different points in history, incentivize different forms of public spectacle. The release of a new policy report will be much more appealing to policy bloggers than to television journalists. Press conferences are an artifact of the broadcast era; bloggers see little value in a press release. The broadcast television era imparted great leverage to advocacy tactics that could make the six o’clock news. The current digital era, with its niche news programming, twenty-four-hour cable stations, hashtag publics, and social sharing, creates leverage for a different set of tactics. The relative power of individual protest tactics—petitions and sit-ins, marches and boycotts—changes apace with the shifting media system. Whether we label these changes to the media system as indicative of changing “media regimes,”⁸ “information regimes,”⁹ “hybrid media systems,”¹⁰ or “civic information paradigms,”¹¹ the central point is that media technologies and media institutions play a role in determining the strategic value of various protest tactics. All movement power is, in part, premised on understanding and leveraging the interests of these changing media entities. Movement power is, in this sense, also media power.

Activism is adapting to the digital age (as are we all). Our expectations of activists, however, remain decidedly anchored in the preceding century. In particular, the era of grand U.S. social movements (roughly the 1960s and early 1970s) often receives hagiographic treatment from scholars and practitioners alike. Those movements were powerful, their tactics successful. Present-day movements are frequently compared with movements of this era and found wanting. In making this comparison, we

usually ignore how those earlier movements were strategically tailored to the emerging broadcast media environment of the day.

Let me animate this point with a celebrated example: the Bloody Sunday march in Selma, Alabama. Taeku Lee discusses the tremendous success of this action in his 2002 book, *Mobilizing Public Opinion*:

The movement strategy of provoking police brutality with nonviolent direct action fit well in Selma. Sheriff Jim Clark’s bigotry and short temper were notorious. . . . The activists marched uneventfully [on Bloody Sunday] through downtown Selma but barely crossed the murky Alabama River on the Edmund Pettus Bridge before they were met by a detachment of law enforcement officers. About fifty Alabama state troopers and several dozen of Sheriff Clark’s posse waited on horseback, fitted with gas masks, billy clubs, and blue hard hats. . . . Newsmen on hand captured the surreal chain of events with film and camera. By sundown, scenes from Selma were broadcast in living rooms throughout the nation. One television station, ABC, interrupted their evening movie, *Judgment at Nuremberg*, to air a film report on the assault. *The raw footage ignited a firestorm of public outrage* [emphasis added].¹²

Lee is describing a key moment in one of the most celebrated, successful social movements of the twentieth century. It was not the sheer number of protesters (approximately six hundred) that made this action so powerful. Nor was it the poetry or the righteousness of their cause. Central to the protesters’ strategy was a clear reading of the affordances

provided by the broadcast-era media environment. If Sheriff Jim Clark had left those protesters alone, the march would have ended uneventfully. The protesters would have had tired limbs and not much else to show for it. If the cameras had not been present, Clark's brutality would have gone unheralded, another chapter in the long history of violence against African Americans in the American South. But raw footage of police brutality was piped into living rooms across the nation. To borrow a phrase from Todd Gitlin, "The whole world was watching."¹³ And since this was 1965, a time when we had only three stations, there was nothing else on television.

Against tremendous odds, civil rights movement activists proudly and stridently forged a better society. Their personal courage was coupled with great strategic acumen. There are good reasons why present-day activists and scholars seek insight from the social movements of that era. But in the search for insight, scholars, public intellectuals, and practitioners alike tend to overlook how the tactics of that era were crafted to match the media system. If the Bloody Sunday march had occurred in 2015, it would have included hashtags and retweets, mash-ups and Vine clips. But it also would have reached a smaller, niche audience through the nightly news, and it would have been immediately reinterpreted, reframed, and denounced by partisan elites. The whole world would not have been subjected to the same images, and the resulting public mobilization would have unfolded along a different path.

Another example: In 1969, during the early years of the environmental movement, two galvanizing moments came when *Time* magazine ran a story about the Cuyahoga River catching fire and when an oil spill off the coast of Santa Barbara received national news

coverage. This was not the first time that a major oil spill had happened, and it was the *twelfth* time the Cuyahoga had caught fire. But because of the limited viewing options of the broadcast media environment, these images were seen in living rooms throughout the nation. Rivers catching fire make for great television footage. The early leaders of the environmental movement seized upon the public attention generated by these broadcast tragedies and used it to galvanize media-friendly actions like the first Earth Day. As Ronald Shaiko put it, "One might ask, philosophically, If Greenpeace activists hold a protest rally in the woods and the media are not there to cover it, do they really make a sound?"¹⁴ The birth of the environmental movement and its most iconic tactical successes were rooted in the affordances of the media system of that time. The problem, however, is that this glamorized remembrance of past social movements inappropriately shades our perceptions of modern-day social movements. Consider, for instance, Nicholas Lemann's indictment of 2010 environmentalists' failure to pass climate legislation through the U.S. Congress:

Today's big environmental groups recruit through direct mail and the media, filling their rosters with millions of people who are happy to click "Like" on clean air. What the groups lack, however, is the [1970] Earth Day organizers' ability to generate thousands of events that people actually attend—the kind of activity that creates pressure on legislators.¹⁵

By Lemann's reckoning, the environmental movement of 2010 was a failure because it did not generate the same "thousands of events that people actually attend" that the environmental movement of the broadcast era had generated.

Now, in the simplest sense, Lemann is factually incorrect: Beginning in October 2006, seven students from Middlebury College worked with their professor, Bill McKibben, to launch the Step It Up day of action on climate. After six months of organizing, facilitated mostly through the Internet, the Step It Up day of action occurred on April 15, 2007. It included 1,410 events across the country.¹⁶ Step It Up later changed its name to 350.org, a leading climate advocacy organization that regularly plans massive global days of action that feature four thousand to five thousand simultaneous events. The youth-led Energy Action Coalition has also repeatedly planned a series of citizen lobby days that have broken records as the largest in U.S. history, bringing fifteen thousand young people into face-to-face contact with their congressional representatives. Present-day movements still plan plenty of "events that people actually attend." But that attendance is no longer picked up and refracted through a broadcast-dominant media system. Without the amplifying power of the broadcast-era industrial media, the same tactics no longer produce the pressure that they once did.¹⁷

The difference between Step It Up and the original Earth Day was not in the quantity of simultaneous teach-ins. It was not in the power of their rhetoric or the resonance of their media frames. The difference was in how those mass protest events were refracted and amplified through the larger media apparatus (and, one might add, in the sclerotic state of U.S. congressional politics).

The original Earth Day, like the Bloody Sunday march in Selma, was strategically tailored to take advantage of a media regime that no longer exists. The mere existence of the teach-ins was *news*. The Earth Day teach-ins attracted broadcast media attention. And the public political agenda was defined through that

media attention. New media refracts at different angles. Recruitment for Step It Up/350.org actions occurs through e-mail lists, Facebook shares, and blog posts. The fact of the 2010 day of action was hashtagged and retweeted. These digital actions defined a political agenda for a public. But they did not leave the same imprint on the broader public consciousness. The lesson gleaned from successful social movements' past cannot be to mimic exactly what they did. The leaders of the present must strategically adapt to this digital refraction, just as social movement leaders of the past adapted to the broadcast refraction.

The current hybrid media environment provides opportunities for activist movements and activist moments that would have gone missing in the older industrial broadcast media environment. As James Rucker, founder of ColorOfChange.org and cofounder of Citizen Engagement Lab, argues: "The media landscape twenty years ago would have prevented the stories driving the Movement for Black Lives today from breaking through. The voices we're now hearing, reading, and seeing are all enabled by an open Internet that has largely avoided corporate or government filter. And they are shifting public dialogue, impacting culture, and building momentum to change policy."¹⁸ When we lionize the tactics of social movements from a bygone era, we blind ourselves to the opportunities and potential presented by current media technologies.¹⁹

Indeed, this appears to be a key ingredient in the success of present-day political movements. The Movement for Black Lives (a.k.a. #BlackLivesMatter) has directed national attention to the crisis of police violence against African Americans. It has done so by adopting a distinctly hybrid media strategy, including the use of hashtags that connected

the dots between a series of individual tragedies and place-based protests, which themselves became the topic of media coverage.²⁰ These activists are not choosing between broadcast media and social media. They are using the tools at their disposal—including social media accounts—to create leverage over their direct targets (public officials) and secondary targets (including mainstream media organizations). Broadcast media outlets sent reporters to Ferguson, Missouri, to cover protests surrounding the death of teenager Michael Brown because Twitter conversation signaled its newsworthiness.²¹ The presence of those same reporters then helped to cocreate the unfolding political spectacle.²² Both broadcast television cameras and cell phone cameras are technologies of refraction. Social movements of the 1960s developed their tactics for an industrial broadcast media environment. Social movements of the 2010s are modifying their tactics for a hybrid media environment.

There is no single "correct" strategy for leveraging digital media into movement power. There is, however, a set of practices that, when properly instituted, helps activist organizations adapt to the rhythms of the digital age. I have only just touched here on the strengths, weaknesses, possibilities, and limitations of those new practices. In particular, we need to focus on the role that new digital listening tools have begun to play in fashioning new tactics and strategies that help large-scale political organizations create leverage in the hybrid media system. *Analytics* encompass a cluster of technologies that allow organizations to monitor online sentiment, test and refine communications, and quantify opinion and engagement. These are *back-end* technologies, viewed by professional campaigners through internal dashboards and fashioned into strategic

objects that are discussed at weekly staff meetings.

Properly harnessed, these technologies allow large organizations to engage in analytic activism. Improperly harnessed, they can send civil society organizations down a crooked path that leads to prioritizing issues, campaigns, and tactics that are more *clickable* over those that are more *important*. Analytic activism supports new innovations in *tactical optimization*, *computational management*, and *passive democratic feedback*. It enables organizations to learn and listen in different ways and to capture the energy refracted through the hybrid media system.

NOTES

1. William A. Gamson and Gadi Wolfsfeld, "Movements and Media as Interacting Systems," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 528, no. 1 (July 1993): 114–25.
2. Andrew Chadwick, *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).
3. Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph N. Capella, *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); and Kevin Arceneaux and Martin Johnson, *Changing Minds or Changing Channels? Partisan News in an Age of Choice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).
4. Arceneaux and Johnson, *Changing Minds or Changing Channels?*; and Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones, *Agendas and Instability in American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).
5. Susan Herbst, *Reading Public Opinion: How Political Actors View the Democratic Process* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). Indeed, as Susan Herbst has repeatedly demonstrated, media coverage often serves this role for researchers

precisely because “public opinion” is so hard to define.

6. Kurt Lang and Gladys Engel Lang, “The Unique Perspective of Television and Its Effect: A Pilot Study,” *American Sociological Review* 18, no. 1 (February 1953): 3–12.
7. Gamson and Wolfsfeld, “Movements and Media as Interacting Systems.”
8. Bruce A. Williams and Michael X. Delli Carpini, *After Broadcast News: Media Regimes, Democracy, and the New Information Environment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
9. Bruce Bimber, *Information and American Democracy: Technology in the Evolution of Political Power*, Communication, Society and Politics series (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
10. Andrew Chadwick, *The Hybrid Media System*.
11. Chris Wells, *The Civic Organization and the Digital Citizen: Communicating*

Engagement in a Networked Age (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

12. Taeku Lee, *Mobilizing Public Opinion: Black Insurgency and Racial Attitudes in the Civil Rights Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).
13. Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).
14. Ronald G. Shaiko, “Greenpeace U.S.A.: Something Old, New, Borrowed,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 528, no. 1 (July 1993): 88–100.
15. Nicholas Lemann, “When the Earth Moved,” *New Yorker*, April 15, 2013, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/04/15/when-the-earth-moved.
16. Dana R. Fisher and Marije Boekkooi, “Mobilizing Friends and Strangers: Understanding the role of the Internet in the Step It Up day of action,” *Information, Communication & Society* 13, no. 2 (March 2010): 193–208.
17. Incidentally, I was in Washington, DC, for the initial Step It Up day of action. Having heard a constant drumbeat about the event through listservs, discussion boards, blogs, and other niche media, I arrived at my parents’ home that weekend and told them why I was in town. My mother was a welfare rights organizer in the 1970s, and my father voted for Nader. Neither of them had heard about the event. In the post-broadcast media environment, you can efficiently target your message to the niche audience you seek to mobilize. But lost in the process is the beneficial inefficiency of spillover information, wherein untargeted individuals become generically aware that a social movement is under way.
18. James Rucker, “Preface: Black Lives Do Matter, and Black Voices Do, Too,” in *The Digital Culture Shift: From Scale to Power* (Center for Media Justice, ColorofChange.org, and Data & Society, 2015), 7.
19. Dan Mercea and Marco T. Bastos, “Being a Serial Transnational Activist,” *Journal of*

Computer-Mediated Communication 21, no. 2 (March 2016): 140–55; and Hadas Eyal, “Digital Fit as a Leg-Up for Nongovernmental Organizations’ Media and Political Success,” *Political Communication* 33, no. 1 (2015): 118–35. Dan Mercea and Marco Bastos have likewise traced the role of “serial activists” in transnational social movements—people who repeatedly use social media to help publicize, support, and orchestrate protest events. And Hadas Eyal has demonstrated that, among Israeli NGOs, “digital fit” is a key determinant of traditional media coverage. Though I focus mostly on American case examples here, there is strong evidence for similar changes on the global scale.

20. Deen Freelon, Charlton D. McIlwain, and Meredith D. Clark, “Beyond the Hashtags: #Ferguson, #Blacklivesmatter, and the online struggle for offline justice,” (Washington, DC: Center for Media & Social Impact, American University School of Communication, February 2016).

21. Zeynep Tufekci, “What Happens to #Ferguson Affects Ferguson: Net Neutrality, Algorithmic Filtering and Ferguson,” Medium, August 14, 2014, medium.com/message/ferguson-is-also-a-net-neutrality-issue-6d2f3db51eb0.

22. Byron Tau, “How the media discovered Ferguson,” *Politico*, August 17, 2014, www.politico.com/story/2014/08/how-the-media-discovered-ferguson-110072.

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