

## Liberation Frequency: The Free Radio Movement and Alternative Strategies of Media Relations

Abstract: A crucial element of struggle for any social movement is the ability to convey its message to both movement participants and the broader public. This paper reveals two little-discussed media strategies that movements may adopt in order to mitigate the problem of how to best get sympathetic news coverage. First, movements can circumvent mainstream media altogether by using alternative media, and second, movements can work to reform the media, thereby changing the rules and structures that govern movement-media relationships. The case study of the free radio movement is used to illustrate these two media strategies and how their use helped the movement achieve moderate successes. I argue that having control over its own representation through alternative media can help a social movement succeed in some of its goals, and I propose hypotheses about the impact of alternative media on social movements.

Integral to any attempt made by social movements to gain access to the polity, to put issues that concern the movement on the public agenda, or to work for social change is the ability of the movement to communicate. Processes of communication--both internally, among SMOs and movement participants, and externally, between the movement and the broader public composed of adherents, bystanders, elites, and opponents--have direct effects on all aspects of social movement struggle, from early mobilization to final outcome. If a movement is unable to communicate information and viewpoints effectively, it loses a critical resource in its struggle.

The movement's communication can be greatly hindered by commercial mass media in the United States, which, taken as a whole, exhibit a structural bias against information and viewpoints that are inherently challenging to the status quo. Mass media coverage of social movement activities frequently is not only unsympathetic to a movement's goals, but often may even undermine a movement. Thus, the ways that social movements attempt to gain positive media coverage are of critical importance, not only to movement participants themselves, but also to sociologists seeking to understand social movement outcomes. Some attention in social movements literature has been devoted to the ways that social movements seek to build relationships with mainstream media in an effort to get positive media coverage, though this is not the only way that movements can gain sympathetic media coverage.

This paper is intended to contribute to the sociological understanding of media-movement relationships by theorizing two little-discussed media strategies that social movements may adopt in order to communicate their views to the broader public. First, rather than "working within the system," accepting the existing conditions of mass media and tailoring movement actions and discourses to court mass media attention, movements can also circumvent mainstream media altogether by using alternative media to communicate. Second, movements

can make mass media itself a target of social protest; that is, they can work to reform the media, thereby changing the rules and structures that govern movement-media relationships.

In this paper, I first outline the problem of media-movement relations and the strategies available to movements that desire media coverage, as discussed in the literature on media and social movements. Next, I use the case study of the free radio movement to illustrate the ways in which the two strategies of alternative media and media reform can be employed by movements, and I discuss the extent to which the media strategies of the movement contributed to the free radio movement's successes. The case study suggests that the use of alternative media and attempts to reform media regulations have the *potential* to enhance the ability of a social movement to communicate to its audience, whether they are movement participants or simply members of a broader public. Finally, as suggestions for further research, I offer a series of hypotheses regarding the implications that the alternative media and media reform strategies may have for both movement actors and for the study of social movements. In the final analysis, this paper suggests that a social movement's ability to control its means of internal and external communication can be a critical variable in explaining social movement trajectories. The existence of alternative media and the "media reform movement" (Opel 2001) calls attention to this aspect of struggle that movements can engage in to accomplish their goals.

### The Problem: Media-Movement Relations

The literature on social movements is filled with studies confirming that the amount and type of media coverage of social movements affects these movements in a variety of ways, whether positively or negatively. First, media coverage of a social movement or a controversial issue can aid or deter mobilization of potential participants (Gitlin 1980; Roscigno and Danaher

2001). Second, media coverage of movements can provide validation for movement actors that they are doing something important and can enlarge the scope of conflict, so that the movement can “improve its relative power compared to that of its antagonist” (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993, p. 116). Third, media coverage of issues or debates within the institutional political structure can provide opportunities for social movements to enter the public debate on that issue (Klandermans and Goslinga 1996; Oliver and Maney 2000; Sampedro 1997). Fourth, when there is no opportunity presented to social movements by the political structure, movements often engage in strategic framing of issues, adopt particular tactics, or stage protest events so that they will get media coverage for their issues (Barker-Plummer 1995; Carroll and Ratner 1999; Rohlinger 2002). Fifth, media coverage can alter the internal dynamics of an SMO and relationships among social movement participants (Gitlin 1980). Sixth, movement trajectories and cycles of protest are affected by media coverage of social movements (Gitlin 1980). Finally, media coverage of protests and social movements can constrain the repressive capacity of authorities wishing to counteract movement activity (Wisler and Giugni 1999). In short, the amount and kind of media coverage that a social movement receives can be critical to whether or not it succeeds in its goals. The assertion that media coverage is important for social movements is not only a recurring theme in social movement literature, but it is also so intuitive that it is taken for granted by many social movement researchers (e.g. Molotch 1979; Smith, McCarthy, et al. 2001).

The unanimity of these various studies highlights a central problem facing social movements: How do movements express their ideas and point of view to a mass audience containing (to adopt McCarthy and Zald’s 1977 terminology) adherents, constituents, bystanders, and potential movement participants? Since media coverage can affect social movements on so

many levels, the amount and type of media coverage a social movement receives are important variables that social movements should concern themselves with. Media coverage of social movements is a central problem for those who desire a particular movement outcome.

Synthesizing the literature on media coverage of social movements with the literature confirming a pro-status quo bias in mainstream media (e.g. Bagdikian 1983; Gans 1979; Smith, McCarthy, et al. 2001; Tuchman 1978), one arrives at the conclusion that media coverage of social movements that facilitates movement goals is difficult to come by. A short list of causes of a pro-status quo bias in media collected from this literature include dependence on advertising, journalists' perceptions of "professionalism," the values of journalists regarding what is newsworthy, time constraints facing journalists, reliance on "official" sources for information, geographic location of journalists, journalistic routines or "beats", and story selection processes. Studies of media coverage of social movements (e.g. Gitlin 1980) confirm many of these causes of bias.

Even if a journalist gives equal space to movement views and non-movement views in a news story, the coverage may still be biased against a movement. The distinction between contested and uncontested realms of media discourse (Gamson et al. 1992) is a valuable conceptual tool for understanding how this might occur. The contested realm of discourse is characterized by "struggles over meaning" in media stories (382). It is in this realm that journalists consciously work, attempting to present "both" points of view on any given issue through their writings. By contrast, in the uncontested realm of discourse, the unquestioned values and assumptions of journalists and the dominant ideology of society can appear without the journalist or the reader being conscious of it. That news stories are not "transparent descriptions of reality" but rather interpretations of events is unacknowledged. Thus, in order for

social movements to gain favorable media attention, they must not only compete with other actors and points of view for favorable attention in the contested realm of discourse, it must also not violate any fundamental values held by journalists that inform the uncontested realm of media discourse. Thus, one would expect revolutionary social movements to be virtually incapable of receiving favorable attention by mainstream media, whereas even reformist social movements must fight an uphill battle for favorable media attention.

Smith, McCarthy, et al.'s (2001) study of media coverage of protests in Washington D.C. is illustrative of the problems facing social movements that seek positive news coverage of their activities and issues. Echoing Oliver and Myers (1999), the authors find that social movements are much more likely to receive media attention through drama, confrontation, or conflict. Social movements therefore often engage in protests and stage media events that emphasize conflict and confrontation. News stories covering such protest events are more likely to focus on details of the drama rather than on the issues at stake or on the motivations of the protestors. The coverage also tends to be framed in ways that favor the authorities. "Stories relying on neutral sources or on authorities were nearly three times more likely to provide extensive discussion of the issue as were stories relying on protestor sources," signifying that movement sources are rarely able to have their own framing of the issue adopted by the mainstream news outlets (Smith, McCarthy, et al. 2001, 1414). They conclude that, "even when movement organizers succeed at obtaining the attention of mass media coverage, the reports represent the protest events in ways that neutralize or even undermine social movement agendas" (Smith, McCarthy, et al. 2001, p. 1398).

Given these systematic disadvantages that social movements face in gaining favorable attention in mass media, what can social movements do to get their messages out? How can social movements inform the broader public of its points of view, add issues to the public

agenda, and call attention to the problems that they are mobilizing against? One might conceive of three possible ways to accomplish this.

First, social movements can adopt strategies for working with the mainstream media, what Barker-Plummer (1995) calls “media pragmatism” (p. 312). Movements seek to develop relationships with journalists and alter their news frames in order to gain more attention from mainstream media. This solution is widely adopted by SMOs and is well studied in the literature. For example, Rohlinger (2002) argues that the different media strategies of NOW and Concerned Women for America (CWA) were partially responsible for the different amounts of success that each organization experienced in how the abortion issue and the organization was portrayed in mass media. Other studies of the women’s movement (Barker-Plummer 1995; Tuchman 1978) and comparisons of social movements’ media strategies (Carroll and Ratner 1999) show how building relationships with journalists and engaging in protests to gain media attention can enhance a movement’s coverage in the mainstream press. Such studies seem to share Gamson and Wolfsfeld’s (1993) hypothesis that “the greater the resources, organization, professionalism, coordination, and strategic planning of a movement, the greater its media standing and the more prominent its preferred frame will be in media coverage of relevant events and issues” (p. 121).

A second option available to movements desiring positive media coverage is simply to bypass mainstream media and use alternative media to publicize its issues. Many alternative media outlets are owned and controlled by particular SMOs, and an even larger number are likely to be sympathetic to social movements, given their mutual anti-status quo stance. Thus, social movement actors who use alternative media do not necessarily have to rely on journalists to interpret their actions and issues in a sympathetic way; rather, the social movement actors can actually produce the media coverage themselves and frame the story in whatever way they

choose. For example, Klandermans and Goslinga (1996) point out that the union newspapers they studied adopted a social movement viewpoint of disability payment issues completely and gave no space for the government's viewpoint. Hadden (1987, p. 5) names media access as a "critical resource" for any social movement and emphasizes the importance of religious broadcasting and televangelism—movement controlled media—for the success of the "New Christian Right" in the U.S. As some authors have pointed out (Carroll and Ratner 1999; Smith, McCarthy, et al. 2001), the rise of the internet and the ability of social movements to control the ways their issues and events are covered in alternative media helps SMOs out of the dilemma of how to best represent themselves to a media audience. By using alternative media, social movements can simply circumvent the problems posed by their dependence on mainstream media for coverage.

The third strategy adopted by social movements seeking to solve the problem of how to best gain positive news coverage is to reform mainstream media itself in such a way that mainstream media will provide a broader range of viewpoints and less biased news coverage to the public. Through this strategy, social movements seek to change the structure of mainstream media such that media institutions would be more receptive to movement messages. One might think of this solution as getting to the root of the problem. Media would be reformed so that, for example, there would not be an over-reliance on authorities as sources of news and information, and that the viewpoints and information received from ordinary citizens would be considered newsworthy as well. This strategy has become increasingly prominent in recent years, as many movements and organizations have been created that focus on reforming media. One of these movements is the free radio (or microradio) movement.

## The Free Radio Movement

In the 1990s, in cities and small towns across the United States, a large number of activists, music enthusiasts, and ordinary citizens started their own low-power radio stations without the legal sanction of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). Since 1978, when the FCC eliminated the Class D license<sup>1</sup>, the FCC had not given broadcast licenses for radio stations operating at less than 100 watts. Noting that this de facto ban on low-power radio prevented all but the wealthiest individuals from owning a radio station, and also perceiving a lack of diversity in radio content, many citizens decided to start their own radio stations without a license from the FCC. They simply inserted their tiny radio stations in unused bandwidths on the FM dial, since they viewed the FCC's requirements on broadcast frequency separation to be outdated and unduly strict. Such stations were both inexpensive and relatively simple to construct; one could easily assemble a microradio station for less than \$1000. And a station broadcasting with 100 watts of power and with an antenna 100 feet above ground could attain a broadcast radius of 3-4 miles, depending on topography and proximity to a larger competing radio station (FCC 2000, p.7). Thus accessible to ordinary citizens, unlicensed FM radio was an efficient and exciting way for someone with a message to speak to an audience.

As will be discussed below, while the broadcast content and identities of each station differed greatly, a large number of stations were united in their goals: first, to challenge the FCC's radio ownership and licensing regulations, which activists perceived as systematically preventing the vast majority of the population from being able to broadcast; and second, to provide an outlet for voices and culture not normally heard on mainstream media. These broadcasters were committing acts of "electronic civil disobedience," broadcasting illegally in order to make the point that rules regulating the radio industry, even the medium itself, needed to

be changed (Soley 1999). More than this, the broadcasting was viewed by the activists as an end in itself—giving a voice to people who, because of their beliefs or music, were not normally heard on the radio. The actions of these free radio activists succeeded both in providing an alternative radio outlet in their communities and in altering the licensing structure of the FCC.

The modern free radio, or “microradio,” movement is considered by almost all authors to have begun in 1987 in the John Jay Homes public housing project in Springfield, IL. A one-watt radio station named WTRA, operating at 107.1 FM, was originally used by the local tenants’ rights activist group as an attempt to address the problem of the unsatisfactory media coverage that the group was receiving. Broadcasting out of the apartment of Mbanna Kantako, one of the group’s organizers, the station operated for over a decade under a variety of names (most recently Human Rights Radio) and was intended to be a voice for the poor black population of Springfield. The threat of legal action against Kantako’s station by the FCC in the late 1980s led the National Lawyer’s Guild’s Committee for Democratic Communications (NLG-CDC) to come to Kantako’s defense. This legal organization came to play a pivotal role in the free radio movement because the NLG-CDC represented Stephen Dunifer and Free Radio Berkeley in their court battle against the FCC. The FCC’s refusal to grant low-power, affordable, radio licenses was challenged on Constitutional grounds as a violation of the freedom of speech of those who could not afford the high costs of applying for a radio station. Dunifer’s court case--which caught the attention of activists across the country--and his efforts to promote microradio provided the opening for literally hundreds of other activists to create their own low-power free radio stations.<sup>2</sup>

While many broadcasters challenged the FCC overtly, as did Free Radio Berkeley, untold numbers of radio stations were broadcasting covertly. The free radio movement encompassed a

wide variety of people, demographically and politically. These stations served everyone from anarchists to religious conservatives, from Spanish-speaking migrant farm workers (e.g. Radio Zapata and Radio Watson in California) to squatters in New York City (e.g. Steal This Radio). Despite the diversity and geographical dispersion of radio stations across the country, participants in the movement established nation-wide organizations (e.g. Micropower Bust Response Network), held conferences for networking and the sharing of skills and information (e.g. First East Coast Microbroadcasting Conference), established websites and email listservs (e.g. [www.radio4all.org](http://www.radio4all.org)), and united for protests against the FCC and the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB). Although the precise size of the movement may never be known, it has been estimated that there were as many as 1000 illegal radio stations on the air throughout the United States in the late 1990s (Coopman 1999).

In the discussion of the free radio movement below, the claims made about the goals and practices of the free radio movement are derived largely from the ways that participants understood the movement and talked about the movement. Much of the information is derived from a series of 19 semi-structured intensive interviews with 24 past and present free radio operators around the country. In all, these 24 informants were involved in eight different radio stations. Of the eight radio stations that were the foci of the interviews, five are no longer broadcasting, and three were broadcasting at the time of the interviews (summer 2001). In each city where I conducted interviews, I typically had one contact person, whom I either contacted via internet websites or whom I knew personally from my previous activity in the movement. I then employed snowball sampling to locate other individuals in the city with whom I could conduct interviews. Due to the covert nature of many stations and the illegality of the movement's activities, the portrait of the free radio movement presented here does not

necessarily represent all free radio broadcasters, still less all unlicensed broadcasters. Locations of stations still broadcasting at the time of the interviews are omitted to protect the informants and their stations, and the names of informants used below are either their on-air names or some other name that they requested to be used.

What is significant about the free radio movement and its successes is that the movement combined the alternative media strategy and the media reform strategy (strategies 2 and 3 above) by employing alternative media *as a tactic* in order to reform dominant media policies and practices. First (strategy 3), free radio became a tactic of a social movement that had reform of the FCC's radio regulations as its target. By altering the rules governing the mainstream radio industry, the activists hoped to allow a wider range of voices access to the airwaves, thereby including (but not limited to) voices sympathetic to or controlled by social movements. Secondly (strategy 2), free radio was used as a form of alternative media, through which people could express information, viewpoints, and music not normally represented on mainstream radio (whether as a result of market forces, the ideology of mainstream media and journalism, or outright censorship). Free radio allowed the broadcasters to mitigate the problem of having their activities and messages framed and interpreted in ways that were beyond their control. Because of this dual strategy, the free radio movement was successful not only in giving members of local communities the ability to express themselves through mass media but also in achieving some limited reforms of radio ownership and licensing procedures. Thus, this case study sheds light on the significance of alternative media and the media reform movement for the problem of dependency of social movements on mainstream media coverage. Specifically, it shows that there is potential for these two strategies to result in positive outcomes for social movements and

to increase the power of social movements over their presentation of self and presentation of ideas in mass media.

### Media Reform: Media As the Target of Protest

As the free radio movement grew in the mid- and late-1990s, the new microradio stations came to share the goal of Kantako, Dunifer, and the NLG-CDC of altering the underlying structure of the radio industry and the FCC's regulation of the radio waves. While broadcasters disagreed about whether the regulation of the airwaves should be reformed or eliminated, they all agreed that some underlying structural changes to the organization and regulation of mainstream radio in the United States was necessary. The fact that the regulatory structure was the target of protest is evident in the three main justifications that microradio broadcasters offered for their activities.

First, movement participants challenged the regulatory authority of the FCC by adopting the rhetoric of free speech and making the claim that all people have both a Constitutional right and a *human* right to communicate via radio. Many of the legal battles that arose from the microradio movement focused on alleged violations of the broadcasters' First Amendment right to free speech due to the FCC's ban on issuing low-power FM radio licenses<sup>3</sup>. For Kantako, Dunifer, and other early movement activists, "The air belongs to everyone who breathes it" (Kantako, quoted in Soley 1999, p. 73). Many of my informants echoed this frame, arguing that being able to express oneself on the air is a civil and human right, an issue of freedom of speech:

From day one, you know, the broadcast was an act of civil disobedience. And the thing that we were saying was that, you know, no one can have ownership of the airwaves; they're a resource that belongs to everyone.... We felt like we were taking, you know,

what rightfully belongs to us. And the whole idea behind the station was to get the public charged up about this issue, to say, you know, “Look we’re going to take what’s ours and we want you to be a part of it....” (Rob, Radio One Austin)

I’ve always been a proponent of free speech and believed that communication is a key to a free society. And when such a large portion of the communication methods of our society are owned by private industry, it really inhibits the ability for the people... to get a message out. And it was really about providing an outlet for those people. (Kevin, Free Radio New Orleans)

The mission statements of Free Radio Memphis and Grid Public Radio in Cleveland also declared free speech to be an important reason for their activities. Thus, the free radio movement was originally framed as an issue about freedom of speech and the denial of free speech rights to the poor and disenfranchised mandated by current radio regulations.

Second, movement participants saw as unjust the extremely high barriers of entry to the medium put in place because of the dominance of corporate, for-profit radio stations and the power of the commercial broadcast lobby over FCC policy in particular. In a brief prepared by the NLG-CDC,<sup>4</sup> Alan Korn criticizes the FCC’s requirement that radio station applicants be able to “construct and operate a radio station for three months, without relying upon advertising or other revenue to meet these costs” (p. 50). Korn estimated that \$50,000-\$100,000 would be necessary for such an undertaking and argued that the poor legally could not be excluded from owning a radio station based on such financial criteria. Radio is one of the cheapest and simplest technologies of all mass media, and movement participants believed it to be unjust that only the

richest members of society could even consider having a radio station. They criticized the current regulatory practices as a violation of “the public interest”:

If you didn't go micro, then it just was not feasible. And since the FCC... didn't want to provide a license for micro-power broadcasting, they forced us... to go against the law.

(Kevin, Free Radio New Orleans)

Micro radio broadcasts are perfectly in line with responsible use of the public airwaves and perfectly in line with the mission of the FCC which specifies the use of minimum power. In fact it might be said that micro radio broadcasters set a better example in their use of the public's airwaves than the megawatt broadcasters which are currently 'regulated' by the FCC. (Eli, Free Radio Memphis, in a letter to the FCC)

Thus, the FCC's licensing policies were a target of the social movement because they prevented large segments of the population from even having the opportunity to broadcast over the radio.

Third, the free radio broadcasters observed that there was a large variety of culture and viewpoints that were being denied access to the airwaves because of corporate dominance of the medium. As a result, microradio activists argued, the medium needed to be changed to allow for a greater diversity of people to be represented on the radio. Free radio was a means of counteracting what they perceived as the homogenization and increased corporate control of culture and points of view expressed via radio:

I did feel like... Austin was threatened by the monoculture that was being presented in that form of media, radio. I was concerned that there was just, you know, one type of music that was being presented and didn't have anything to do with real people in Austin.

The news that was presented was very watered-down and extremely biased by corporate interests. (Anne, Radio One Austin)

I personally felt like the information, sources of information in our society, namely TV, radio, newspaper, are primarily dominated by corporate interests and... generally used to sell advertisements, to sell an audience to advertisers. But to some degree it's also used as a news source, for misinformation.... So I thought there were voices of community that needed to have a voice in the airwaves.... (Jeff, Free Radio New Orleans)

There's not anything on the radio that really celebrates the diversity of our culture. Mostly what's on the radio is, you know, carefully prescribed, selected music that's targeting a particular market.... There was really, you know, nothing to listen to, and it was pretty amazing how quickly people signed up to be DJs.... And it wasn't just like lefty radical activists like myself; it was regular people who had never been active before on any level; like they just loved music and they loved radio and... they wanted to get some music and the information out to people that they knew about, that they knew other people didn't know about. And that's what really was the driving force. (Morgan LaFey, Radio Mutiny)

Free radio activists thought it was necessary to add their viewpoints and cultures to the public arena, to ensure that democracy would be allowed to take into account all viewpoints and opinions. As the Mission Statement of Free Radio Memphis noted, this desire to expand the

public discourse and their criticisms of the mainstream media were central to their justification for broadcasting without a license:

Our intention is to motivate ourselves and others to be fully liberated and to also work towards the creation of a truly democratic society. As a collective, our contribution to this work is to offer alternative views and information which is being deliberately filtered out by mainstream media. In doing so, we consistently strive to broaden the parameters of what is publicly debated and to provide a space for voices of dissent as well as to provide a space to express our passion for life.

Thus, free radio activists attributed the lack of diverse content on radio to the dominance of large, for-profit broadcasters in the medium. The structure of mainstream radio was such that it prevented many cultures and perspectives from being expressed on the radio, and the free radio movement sought to change this structural bias.

### Successes of the Media Reform Strategy

These three main reasons offered by free radio broadcasters for operating their unlicensed stations illustrate the media reform strategy, that they hoped to change the medium itself in order to allow a wider diversity of people to express their viewpoints and share their music with an audience. And to a degree, the free radio movement succeeded in this goal. These microradio activists were significant actors in bringing about tangible policy changes in the FCC's licensing structure. The free radio movement generated a significant amount of news coverage sympathetic to the movement, and this put pressure on the FCC to account for the increasing corporate dominance and concentration of ownership in radio to which the free radio movement

was calling attention. Speculating about the role of the free radio movement on what happened next, Pete Tridish of Radio Mutiny said, “I think that we made it very uncomfortable for the FCC. The FCC does not want to be regarded like the IRS or something like that.... They knew that they couldn’t really beat us in a public relations war without at least to some extent joining us. And that’s what they did.”

Partially as a result of the tremendous enforcement burden created by the free radio movement and the pressure put on the FCC by the movement to ensure that content and ownership diversity remain in radio, the FCC, on January 20, 2000, issued a *Report and Order* (No. 99-25), which established guidelines for the creation of a new low-power FM (LPFM) class of radio stations (FCC 2000). In the previous year, the FCC had received thousands of comments and studies about the merits and demerits of a similar LPFM proposal from (among others) individual microradio activists and organizations like the NLG-CDC and the Prometheus Radio Project. Opel (2001) shows that the FCC adopted much of the discourse used by the free radio movement in the final document, and the form of the LPFM service was compatible with some of the goals of the movement.

The *Report and Order* established two classes of licenses, for 100-watt and 10-watt power levels. The LPFM stations were to be strictly non-commercial; they were to be owned and operated by pre-existing non-profit organizations; and they were required to be located in the same market as the station owner. No individual or organization could own more than one LPFM station, and current radio station owners (in addition to known, active pirate broadcasters) were forbidden from applying for an LPFM station license. The application process was greatly streamlined and many of the fees waived, so that the barriers to applying for a station would be as low as possible. Despite the subsequent intervention by Congress that drastically diminished

(by at least 60%) the number of LPFM stations that could be licensed<sup>5</sup>, the implementation of LPFM should be considered a significant, if partial, victory by the free radio movement.<sup>6</sup>

As of this writing, over 400 LPFM radio stations are on the air across the United States, many of which are owned and operated by organizations that likely would have never been able to afford to own a radio station under the old licensing structure. One such example is WCTI 107.9 FM, Radio Consciencia in Immokalee, FL, owned and operated by the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, an organization of migrant farm workers who have been organizing for better pay and working conditions since 1996 and is perhaps best known for its recent boycott of Taco Bell. One hypothetical consequence of LPFM is that, by legalizing and institutionalizing the style of broadcasting that the free radio movement advocated, the number of participants and the potential audience for alternative radio is greatly increased.

#### Free Radio as an Alternative to Mainstream Media

Free radio activists saw their radio stations as fundamentally different from mainstream radio stations. Though they hoped to change the regulations and policies that shaped the medium as a whole, the activists also saw their free radio stations as representing an alternative voice on the airwaves, providing a community with an authentic, participatory media outlet. How they organized their radio stations, the emphasis on under-represented information, viewpoints, and music in the broadcast content of the free radio stations, and the emphasis on representing local community interests in broadcast content all show the ways in which the free radio activists distinguished their stations as “alternative,” in contrast to other mainstream radio stations, both commercial and non-commercial.

First, the organizational structure of the free radio stations created by the activists is one way that the free radio stations were distinguished from mainstream and corporate radio stations. With one exception (Grid Radio), all free radio stations in my study were run by a sort of collective decision-making process and were characterized by varying degrees of decentralization and hierarchy. Stations like Radio One and Free Radio New Orleans were primarily controlled by only a couple of people. Mr. Fang, a DJ at Radio One Austin, explained,

Even though there were some key people who had set up the station and, you know, who were the founders, they didn't act like they were the station's management. I mean, it was all a collaborative effort; everyone took it on a volunteer basis and pitched in their time doing things other than their shows.

Stations like Free Radio Memphis, Radio Mutiny, and Radio CPR were run by a formal "collective" structure according to democratic (sometimes consensus) decision-making procedures. Describing the consensus model of decision-making at Free Radio Memphis, Jac presented a hypothetical situation:

We put it to a vote, and let's say there were ten people for it and two against it; well those two were not willing to, you know, just stop the process, although they could have.... It was almost like someone had to convince one of the people that disagreed.

Stations like Anti-Watt and Free 103 exhibited an extreme degree of decentralization in the organizational structure and decision-making process. At Anti-Watt, a college-based free radio station, the organization of the station changed from semester to semester, depending on which students expressed interest in taking charge of the station.

Secondly, the station's format or broadcast content is an important indicator of the alternative to mainstream radio that the free radio movement represented. Most of the free radio stations examined in this study, in contrast to most mainstream radio stations, do not have identifiable formats. Only Free 103 and Grid Radio had specific types of music that it sought to present on their stations. The other six stations in my study all had very diverse programming schedules. The stations emphasized music not normally heard on the radio, from punk rock to trova (Latin American protest music), from independent hip-hop to folk. The mix of music would be different, depending on what hour of what day the listener tuned in. It would not be strange to hear goth/industrial music played back-to-back with old Negro spiritual hymns. Anne at Radio One Austin, described their station's broadcast content this way:

We were very interested in playing a lot of rhythm-based types of music: Hip-hop, jazz, blues, you know, a lot of techno and ambient music. Those types of music weren't really being presented [on mainstream radio]. And then also world music, Native American music and news. You know, having a local green program I think was something that we didn't get anywhere on the airwaves. We had a libertarian that had a show—that wasn't something that was available anywhere else.

The news and information offered on each of these stations also emphasized those perspectives not normally heard in mainstream media. On Radio Mutiny, for example, Morgan LaFey did a weekly live poetry show called "Poetry Sauce." Another DJ, The Condom Lady, did a show on public health issues, featuring such topics as sexual health and needle exchange, mixed with music that a fellow DJ, Pete Tridish, described as "sort of K-Tel classic disco of the 70s." The

Condom Lady explained that her show provided information that could not be found anywhere else on the radio:

I discovered that I could do some talking and play a little music and do some stuff about health that you weren't really hearing on the dial anywhere—talking about gynecology, sexually transmitted diseases, how to examine your breasts, how to put on a condom, that kind of stuff. Things related to harm reduction, needle exchange.... I had guests from like all these different organizations in the city that, you know, couldn't get air time on, through normal channels.

At Free Radio Memphis, there were shows on labor issues, anarchism, queer culture, radical education, and feminist issues. Radio CPR carried some programs in foreign languages, including one program that was broadcast in English, Spanish, and Portuguese. Thus, the broadcast content of the free radio stations exemplified the members' commitment to providing an alternative to what is currently offered by mainstream radio stations.

Finally, the broadcasters in the free radio movement distinguished themselves from their corporate counterparts by bringing local control and a focus on local issues to the medium. As recent trends in radio ownership show (FCC 2001), mainstream radio stations are increasingly owned and controlled by large companies based in far-away places. Further, the local staff of radio stations has been shrinking drastically as satellite content streaming and computer automation have started to replace workers (Huntemann 1999). By contrast, the free radio movement hoped to restore a local orientation to radio. Grid Public Radio, for example, was consciously attempting to serve the needs of the local "community." The station's mission statement declares, "G.P.R. is dedicated to enlightening and activating the citizens of Cleveland

by promoting local theater, politics, news, music, alternative view points and other ‘real’ issues that affect our community.” Anti-Watt, the college station, began as a way for students to have a media outlet that was responsive to their college’s culture and issues. Since its beginnings, the station has occasionally been used to organize local demonstrations and activities, as well as to report on the activities of student government and public meetings.

Radio CPR exemplifies this localized approach to radio. The station grew out of the community organizing efforts of a local neighborhood organization, and many of the station operators and DJs are employed in social service agencies in the area. At the time of the interviews, the station was broadcasting out of a spare room of a neighborhood church. The neighborhood is unusually diverse, composed of refugees from Central America, African-Americans, whites, and “hipsters,” all of whom have very different cultures and lifestyles. Many in the station expressed a desire to break down barriers between the residents of the neighborhood and begin building “real relationships.” Two DJs explained the local orientation of Radio CPR this way:

Hopefully we have a radio station where anyone [elsewhere] in the world would have no interest in what we’re talking about. (DJ Aphrodite)

We are very locally oriented, and we are focusing on this pretty small geographical area where our community is and where we’ve been living and working for so long.... It’s about people physically coming to this studio and meeting each other and doing stuff together. (Maude Ontario)

This local focus is reflected in Radio CPR's programming, which features shows such as the "Neighborhood Power Hour," containing local music, interviews with local people, and information about community activism. Thus, Radio CPR's activities are firmly grounded in the institutions, interests, and activism in the neighborhood.

Free 103 also exemplifies the local orientation to alternative content provided by microradio. The operators of this station promote the underground DJ community in their city by broadcasting live shows and giving DJs an outlet for spinning records on the air, which results in a unique blend of music, mixed live, on the spot. Free 103 practices frequency-sharing with other microradio stations nearby; each station broadcasts at different times of the week on the same frequency. This practice exhibits the belief that low-power radio is perfectly suited for use by small communities or neighborhoods, since several small radio stations could all share the same space on the airwaves. As DJ Dizzy explained it:

We're telling people, you know, 'Tune in almost any evening, and if you're not hearing us, you're going to hear some other pirate.'... It's such a low-power thing that they could all be sharing somewhat the same frequencies, you know, if they're scattered around.

And the technologies and what I have seen and heard over the couple of years in [this city] listening to the airwaves, listening to the pirates, there's plenty of room to space a bunch of little community stations on the air. (DJ Dizzy)

The view that each community and each neighborhood could potentially have their own microradio station is a vision that is at odds to the current practice of mainstream stations, which strive to be as powerful as possible and reach as many people as possible so as to help meet the financial interests of each station. The vision of radio advanced by participants in the free radio

movement pays more attention to local needs, cultural diversity, and the depth and breadth of public debate on the medium, in comparison with the current practices of mainstream radio stations. In these ways, the free radio movement exemplified the characteristics of alternative media.

### Successes of the Alternative Media Strategy for Other Social Movements

A discussion of the “success” of any media outlet must include some measure of audience. To my knowledge, no research exists on the size or nature of the audience of microradio stations, and my informants had no knowledge of how many people actually listened to their stations. Thus, the extent to which each free radio station can be considered successful is debatable and likely varies from one station to another. Nevertheless, there are several indicators that the free radio stations in this study did have a sufficient number of participants and listeners to have an impact on the airwaves of the cities in which they broadcasted.

First, many informants shared anecdotes about callers or chance encounters with strangers who knew of the station. Additionally, they talked about how they got their friends to tune in to the station or told stories of getting a place of business to change their radio so that it was tuned to the illegal broadcast. Thus, listenership likely spread through personal networks, and some stations even actively advertised themselves. Second, at least four of the eight stations in my study—Grid Radio, Radio One Austin, Radio Mutiny, and Free Radio Memphis--received local press coverage, both on television and in newspapers. It can be reasonably inferred that the audience of those mainstream media outlets at least knew of the free radio stations in their cities. Grid Radio was actually well known enough to appear in the Arbitron ratings (a measure of radio listenership) in Cleveland (Jerry Szoka, personal interview). Third, though this was not true for

any of the stations in my study, Anderson (2004) reports that some microradio stations—namely radio free brattleboro and San Francisco Liberation Radio—obtained support from local governments in the form of resolutions and ballot initiatives.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the free radio stations were successful in that they facilitated the efforts of other social movements to communicate their views directly to the radio audience. The fact that the free radio stations in this study exhibited alternative organizational structures and featured broadcast content that was both alternative and locally oriented means that these media outlets were particularly conducive to sympathetic coverage of social movement activities and views. First, these stations often grew out of pre-existing activist communities or organizations. WTRA in Springfield, IL, was started as part of the tenants' rights organization in the John Hay Homes Housing Project. Radio CPR was started by members of neighborhood organizing groups to contribute to their organizing efforts. Radio Mutiny and Free Radio Memphis grew out of the anarchist communities in the two cities, and in Memphis at least, was intended originally to be a tool for propagating the anarchist/activist community's views. Many free radio activists hosted shows about issues of other social movements, such as feminist and labor movements.

The stations were also used to mobilize support for social movements, to encourage people to attend demonstrations, and to report on specific protest activities. For example, David at Anti-Watt recalled that the station was used by some students to promote various political causes: "There were some attempts to use it for organizing.... I think one group used it for a Mumia march that was done in town and against prisons, and used the radio as a way to let everyone know and kind of prep everyone." News coverage of protest events by these free radio stations could be very different from the coverage by mainstream news outlets. Eli of Free Radio

Memphis, recounted how this was true for a counter-protest of a Ku Klux Klan rally, in which a riot erupted after the police fired tear gas into the crowd in an effort to disperse the counter-demonstrators:

We were probably the only media outlet in the entire city that reported the truth, as far as I'm concerned. Most of the media recorded the truth initially; they did a pretty good job because their reporters were down there getting gassed by the cops, and they saw first-hand what exactly happened. But within 12 hours, pretty much all the media outlets had run through their filtering process, and now it went from being the police provoking the crowd into a riot to the gangs provoking an incident. The transformation was amazing.... I think that was probably one of our shining moments, because we, for a full week or two after, we kept on it, and we kept talking about the truth of what happened, the fact that it was a police-provoked riot.

In Eli's account, mainstream news outlets originally reported that the counter-demonstration appeared peaceful and that there was no apparent reason that the police used tear-gas on the demonstrators; however, after receiving the official statements of the Memphis police department, the news outlets changed their story and reported that the police were reacting to the counter-demonstrators' aggressiveness, a result of "gang activity" in the crowd. Free Radio Memphis, however, insisted that the counter-demonstration was peaceful and that the police provoked the riot. Many DJs went to great lengths to ensure that the anti-racist activists' account of the incident was broadcast to its listeners.

On the whole, then, the free radio movement was successful in providing an alternative to mainstream radio stations in the cities where they operated. The available evidence suggests that

at least some of the free radio stations in this study facilitated the mobilization and promotion of other social movements, gave activists a chance to communicate directly to an audience, and provided a more sympathetic view of some social movement activities than did mainstream media outlets.

### Successes of the Alternative Media Strategy for the Free Radio Movement Itself

In addition to providing a media outlet for other social movements, the practice of microbroadcasting helped to sustain the free radio movement itself. The short-term survival of each station can be considered a success not only because each day on the air constituted another day of broadcasting alternative music and views, but also because the activity of broadcasting seemed to increase the chances that the free radio movement would succeed in its goal of reforming the regulatory structure of radio. Ironically, this can most clearly be seen in the repressive tactics used by the FCC against the movement: the FCC's campaign of repression only began to succeed when it started taking the microradio stations off the air.

Initially, the FCC chose to deal with the problem presented by the free radio movement through the time-consuming legal system. Not only did the requirements of the court cases *not* prevent the broadcasters from continuing to operate during the legal process, but also the FCC's initial legal setbacks in the Free Radio Berkeley case proved embarrassing to the agency and gave scores of other groups across the country the courage to join the movement. Because the FCC initially seemed unable to shut down or successfully prosecute the free radio broadcasters, the movement participants could continue to broadcast and the stations could continue to serve as working examples of how micro-power radio should operate. In short, the FCC's inability to shut down the free radio movement's media outlets allowed the movement to continue to thrive. The

case of Grid Radio in Cleveland is instructive, since the FCC pursued the legal case against the owner, Jerry Szoka. After sending a cease and desist letter in 1997, the FCC was not able to shut down the station until January 1999. The appeals process lasted until February 2002. Though the FCC eventually shut the station down, the effort no doubt cost the agency a good deal of time and money. And because Grid Radio continued to broadcast through 1999, it inspired many other individuals in the Cleveland area to start unlicensed stations (Jerry Szoka, personal interview).

However, a change of tactics in 1996 proved much more effective in slowing down the free radio movement, successfully pacifying (though by no means eliminating) much of the movement by 2000. Starting in early 1996, FCC agents began enlisting the help of law enforcement officials (usually Federal Marshals) for raiding free radio stations and confiscating the broadcasting equipment. This change in strategy put the FCC in the best of all possible positions: “By seizing the transmitters, the FCC immediately put the free radio broadcasters off the air and on the defensive, requiring them to go to court to get their transmitters back, where they would be required to show that they had a legal right to operate the transmitters. Proving this to a court would be very difficult” (Soley 1999, p. 122). This tactic gave the FCC the upper hand in the legal arena and silenced the unlicensed broadcasters. By taking the free radio stations off the air, many movement participants either were unable to find the necessary resources to continue operating, or they lost the will to do so. It became apparent that the FCC could rather easily undo all the work that the broadcasters did to build the station, simply by confiscating the broadcast equipment. And without the media outlet, the act of broadcasting, which was so central to the tactics and the identity of the movement, was eliminated.

Thus, the raid on Radio Mutiny on June 22, 1998, succeeded in putting the station off the air permanently. At Free Radio New Orleans, merely the threat of a bust, after a first visit to the

station by police officers, was enough to scare most of the DJs away, thereby shutting down the station. Free Radio Memphis managed to survive the first FCC raid against the station because Free Radio New Orleans gave the Memphis activists their now-quiet equipment. However, the second raid, on November 18, 1998, shut Free Radio Memphis down permanently, thanks in part to the fact that three operators were arrested and prosecuted for “theft of services under \$500.”<sup>7</sup> Finally, in the case of Radio One Austin, not only was the station’s equipment confiscated, but also a \$1400 fine was levied against Rob, one of the station’s founders. In all of these cases, the elimination of the alternative media outlet by confiscating the broadcasting equipment was integral to the success of the FCC’s repression. It should also be noted here that the FCC’s long process of planning the LPFM service also encouraged some activists to turn to lobbying for the legal low-power radio rather than continue to broadcast illegally. For example, after Radio Mutiny’s equipment was confiscated, some of the broadcasters decided to form Prometheus Radio Project, an organization devoted to lobbying for LPFM and helping people become *legal* low-power broadcasters, rather than try to restart the station. Thus, the combined strategy of repression and co-optation—both taking the microradio stations off the air and promising to provide a new *legal* avenue for alternative voices on the radio--proved remarkably successful for the FCC.

The preceding discussion of the successes of the alternative media strategy illustrates a fundamental tension inherent in both the free radio movement and in the alternative media strategy generally. Both social movements and alternative media outlets are torn between two conflicting goals: first, to create internal group solidarity by communicating the views and cultural orientations of its constituents (or audience), and second, to make a broad public impact, either by attempting to alter the status quo or to reach a large audience with its alternative

message. By being *alternative*, an alternative media outlet simultaneously limits its potential audience and makes it a goal to have a significant impact on society. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the ways this tension is resolved by different social movements or alternative media outlets. I will simply point out that this tension exhibited itself in the free radio movement in the ways that participants talked about the goals and practices of their stations. Further, the way this tension is resolved by each station likely affects the size and composition of the audience and the extent to which the alternative media strategy is “successful.”

### Conclusion and Implications for Social Movement Theory

The free radio movement began by seeking to change the underlying policies and practices that govern mainstream radio because the microradio activists believed that mainstream radio did not represent their interests and did not provide the diversity of information, views, and culture necessary for democratic participation in society. They adopted alternative media itself as the tactic for lobbying for these changes, and in the process, they provided local individuals, groups, and social movements with the opportunity to speak for themselves through the mass media. The free radio movement, which exemplifies both the alternative media strategy and the media reform strategy for dealing with the problem of media-movement relations, met with limited success in both of its media strategies. First, microradio stations successfully broadcast alternative news, information, and culture for their listeners, providing a unique local focus that the activists believed was lacking in mainstream radio, and providing a voice for social movements—both the free radio movement itself and other social movements to which the broadcasters were sympathetic. Second, the movement provided the impetus for media reform--the FCC’s establishment of a new class of non-commercial, low-power FM radio stations that

could be owned and controlled by SMOs, community groups, educational organizations, and religious groups. These successes must be described as limited, however, because the size and composition of the audience of these microradio stations is unknown, as is the extent to which the alternative media messages were positively received by listeners. Further, many stations in my case study are no longer broadcasting, and the new LPFM service established by the FCC is unlikely to fully rectify the problems with radio (in both content and regulatory structure) pointed to by the free radio movement. Nevertheless, unlicensed microradio broadcasting continues to this day, suggesting that the movement has survived and may only be in a period of abeyance.

At a general level, the case of the free radio movement suggests that the existence of an alternative media outlet (whether controlled by an SMO or merely sympathetic to social movement messages), depending on the size and nature of the audience, can be an important element of the repertoire of protest and can increase a movement's chances of success. As one of my informants put it, "it doesn't matter how noble your cause, it doesn't matter how well-produced your story; if you don't have control of access [to media], or ability to access [media], none of the rest of it matters" (Joan D'Arc, personal interview). Because this paper considers only one case study, though, no strong conclusions should be drawn regarding precisely what effects alternative media might have on social movements. Thus, I offer several hypotheses as suggestions for further research on how alternative media affect various aspects of social movements, *assuming the existence of a receptive audience composed of people both internal and external to the movement*<sup>8</sup>:

1) Mobilization-- An SMO supported by an alternative media outlet will be more successful in mobilizing potential participants because the social movement media increases the number of people who are aware of the movement, thus (to use Klandermans and Oegema's 1987 terminology) removing a barrier to participation (knowledge of the movement) and increasing the number of people who are targets of mobilization attempts via media.

2) Cycles of Protest/Abeyance—A social movement supported by a movement-controlled media outlet will have a longer life span because it can control (to a certain extent) some of the images of the movement disseminated by media. Forces that threaten to undermine a movement that result from mass media coverage are not as potent because the social movement can offer an alternative representation of itself. Additionally, movement-controlled alternative media may help that movement survive a period of abeyance (Taylor 1989) because media production not only keeps participants involved in the movement even when the political opportunity structure is relatively closed, but also because media production allows the movement's ideas and views to continue to be expressed.

3) Tactics—An SMO with a movement-controlled media outlet can use alternative media messages as another tactic in its repertoire of protest. Simply providing alternative information or an alternate perspective to that provided by the opposition can strengthen a social movement's chance of success. Thus, a social movement with its own media outlet can wage a "culture war" or an "information war" with its opponent as part of its protest strategy.

4) Framing— A social movement supported by an alternative media outlet will have greater success in framing issues and activities in movement-sympathetic ways than movements that must rely on mainstream media for presenting movement issues to the public. This is due to the

ability of the movement to offer its viewpoint of relevant issues and activities to both movement participants and other audience members.

5) Collective Identity—The participants of a movement with its own alternative media outlet will possess a stronger collective identity than participants in a movement without access to an alternative media outlet, due to the greater number of opportunities for participants to send and receive media messages that increase the individual's identification with the movement.

6) Relationship with Mainstream Media—An SMO with a movement-controlled media outlet will devote fewer organizational resources to developing strategies, relationships, and actions for mainstream media because it will be less dependent upon mainstream media coverage for conveying movement messages to audience members. In short, the SMO will not focus as much on the strategy of media pragmatism outlined at the beginning of this paper.

7) Social Movement Outcomes—A social movement supported by an alternative media outlet will have a greater probability of achieving movement goals than similar social movements without an alternative media outlet because it is more able to control the ways the movement and the issues are presented to the public. This hypothesis follows from the movement's hypothesized greater success in mobilization, framing, and strengthened collective identity.

8) Structure of Political Opportunity—Movement-controlled alternative media will facilitate mobilization by *other* social movements not directly related to an SMO that controls the alternative media outlet because a more conducive media environment exists to accommodate movement messages. As Gamson and Meyer (1996) point out, "The media system's openness to social movements is itself an important element of political opportunity" (p. 287). Thus, an alternative media outlet that is open to social movement messages greatly enhances the opportunities for successful mobilization by other movements.

In sum, this case study illustrates both the alternative media strategy and the media reform strategy and the *potential* for these two strategies to be used to achieve social movement goals. As a whole, this paper suggests, first, that an alternative media outlet mitigates the problems that all social movements face of how to get sympathetic media coverage (and therefore increasing the probability of realizing social movement goals) because the movement can control its media representation directly, or at least count on the perspective of the alternative media outlet to be sympathetic. Additionally, this case study suggests that targeting mainstream media for reform may prove to be an effective strategy for social movements that seek sympathetic media coverage because, as with the new LPFM radio service, successful media reform alters the media landscape and the conditions under which journalists and media outlets operate. To use a simple metaphor, 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.

Finally, this analysis suggests that the ability of a social movement to *control* the means of communication can be a valuable asset for social movements seeking to accomplish their goals. Movement-controlled alternative media outlets allow social movements to directly construct their own public image and to disseminate information and views to a broader public, rather than being subject to the interpretation and selection processes of mainstream media that are beyond the social movement's control. Assuming they have an audience, alternative media outlets can weaken the elite's control over the terms of public debate, thereby diminishing the inequalities of power between the social movement and its more powerful opponents. Social movements, by employing the alternative media strategy and the media reform strategy, can shift

the balance of power (relatively, not absolutely) away from the status quo and more towards the movement, thereby increasing their chances of success.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> National Public Radio lobbied forcefully for this ban on low-power licenses, since NPR stood to gain a large number of affiliate stations (and hence, more funding) by requiring existing Class D stations to upgrade their power levels.

<sup>2</sup> For more information about Kantako's station, Free Radio Berkeley, and the NLG-CDC, see Coopman 1995; Howley 2000; Opel 2001; Shields and Ogles 1995; Soley 1999; Sakolsky 1998; and Walker 2001.

<sup>3</sup> For a thorough discussion of court cases associated with unlicensed broadcasting, focusing on the microradio movement, see Anderson (2004).

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.nlgcdc.org/briefs/microradio\\_mbanna.html](http://www.nlgcdc.org/briefs/microradio_mbanna.html), accessed 1/2/04

<sup>5</sup> For an account of Congress' intervention, see Opel 2001.

<sup>6</sup> On June 4, 2004, Senators McCain and Leahy introduced a bill to Congress to reverse the Congressional intervention in LPFM, essentially restoring the LPFM service to its original strength. This action is based on the results of the Congressionally mandated study of LPFM, which found no merit to the interference arguments advanced by commercial broadcasters that were initially used to justify curtailing the LPFM service.

<sup>7</sup> The broadcasters were charged with stealing electricity from the University of Memphis by plugging their equipment into an outlet at the top of the parking garage, from which their mobile station broadcast.

<sup>8</sup> It is beyond the scope of this article to fully address considerations of audience that would have a bearing on the effect of alternative media on social movements. The size and composition of the audience, the other media messages to which the audience is exposed, and the form of alternative media are all important variables that would affect the reception and interpretation processes of media messages. I echo Downing's (2003) concern that the audience of alternative media is significantly under-studied.