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**People, Press, and Protest:
Racial Justice Movements and the Media from 1960 to Present**

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Abstract

People, Press, and Protest: Racial Justice Movements and the Media from 1960 to Present

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When working in concert with people-powered social movements, the media have had a profound impact on the history of these movements and their political victories by taking the demands of the people from the streets to the policy sphere. From Jim Crow to mass incarceration, from Black Power to Black Lives Matter, social movements have been mediated through both mainstream and activist press, acting not as a filter, but as a megaphone for transformative political change. With the rise in journalistic functions of nontraditional and networked media, the megaphone has only gotten louder. This report will assess how mainstream, activist, and networked media have informed, covered, and incubated grassroots movements for racial justice from 1960 to present, drawing on historical record to make policy recommendations for a free and democratic press in today's media and political environment.

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I. “Let the people see what I’ve seen.”¹

Mamie Elizabeth Till-Mobley insisted on an open casket funeral.

On August 28, 1955, white vigilantes in Money, Mississippi, lynched her 14-year-old son. They brutally beat him, shot him, and tied a 75-pound cotton gin fan around his neck with barbed wire before tossing his lifeless body into the Tallahatchie River.

Till-Mobley invited a *Jet* magazine reporter to take photos of her child’s body, beaten beyond recognition, and display it for the country. The photos of Emmett Till became a symbolic representation of the brutality of racism in the American South that awakened a generation and galvanized a movement.

Jet magazine sold out two printings of the issue containing the photos. The *Chicago Defender*, which had served as the pre-eminent voice and source for the struggles, achievements, and progress of the African American community for half a century, also published the images. They were seared into the collective African American consciousness. But millions of white Americans never saw those images. The white press — and its predominantly white readership — inhabited a different world.

A decade before Till’s murder, Swedish economist and journalist Gunnar Myrdal noted the media’s disconnect from reality in the American South. He observed the prevalence of violent anti-black racism — as well as its absence from most news accounts. The Swedish press at the time was constrained by government censorship, but American press had an entirely different problem: The First Amendment guaranteed the press could operate free from government intervention, but the constitutional promise of a free press does not ensure a fair press. While black-owned and operated newspapers and some

¹ NBC News. *Hope & Fury: MLK, the Movement, and the Media*. March 24, 2018.

independent liberal white outlets in the South covered Jim Crow extensively, for the mainstream press, racism wasn't a story.

Myrdal firmly believed, as he stated in his 1944 report on American race relations, *An American Dilemma*, “that a great majority of white people in America would be prepared to give the Negro a substantially better deal if they knew the facts.”² Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff write in *The Race Beat: The Press, the Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation*:

Myrdal, the foreigner, saw clearly what even the most astute Americans saw only dimly, if at all: that the black press was at the center of a developing negro protest in the United States. But if the protest were to succeed, the mainstream press — the white press — would have to write about it so candidly and so repeatedly that white Americans outside the South could no longer look the other way.

Myrdal was a staunch assimilationist. Instead of recognizing the importance of the black and activist press as a check on dominant structures of political power, he saw the future of the Civil Rights movement as residing in the hands of liberal white America, at a moral center between segregationists and antiracists.

While Myrdal helped bring international attention to what he called “the race problem” in America, he also contributed to the supremacy of racist ideas of assimilation. In *American Dilemma*, Myrdal wrote: “It is to the advantage of American Negroes as individuals and as a group to become assimilated into American culture, to acquire the traits held in esteem by the dominant white Americans,” and, “In practically all its divergences, the American Negro culture is... a distorted development, or a pathological condition, of the general American culture.”³

² Roberts, Gene and Klibanoff, Hank. *The Race Beat: The Press, the Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation*. 2006. (New York: Vintage Books).

³ Kendi, Ibram X. *Stamped from the Beginning: A Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*. (New York: Nation Books, 2014).

Mainstream media bias in the years leading up to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s reinforced dominant racist ideas by eliding or undermining black perspectives, ranging from dismissal and ignorance to outright disrespect and scapegoating.

In an interview for NBC's 2018 documentary feature *Hope & Fury: MLK, the Movement and the Media*, Taylor Branch, Pulitzer prize-winning author of the Martin Luther King Jr. biography series *Parting the Waters*, said of the white press: "They didn't even often use the names of black people because that would be a sign of respect. It's galling now, to look at the level of disregard and oblivion that was in the media at that time."

The white press would ultimately help advance the cause of Civil Rights into the broader American consciousness — but only in concert with a movement that made careful and calculated use of it.

It was after *Jet* and the *Chicago Defender* published photos of Emmett Till's brutalized body that Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white man on a Montgomery, Alabama, bus, and the young pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., emerged as the charismatic leader of the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

Parks' resistance to Montgomery's bus segregation laws, and the widespread and remarkably successful boycotts that followed, went largely unnoticed by the mainstream press. The morning after Parks' arrest, the *Montgomery Advertiser* published the headline, "Negro Woman Jailed Here for 'Overlooking' Bus Segregation."⁴

But the boycott made the front page of the *Defender*, and precipitated the paper's move to daily publication to keep up with its readership's demand for coverage of the growing

⁴ Roberts and Klibanoff. *The Race Beat*.

resistance movement in the South.⁵ The *Defender* championed an activist tradition in journalism, deploying narratives rooted in bread-and-butter issues and the experiences of everyday Americans under political oppression, elided or ignored by the mainstream press.

By documenting the reality of racism in the American south, these activist publications helped to galvanize and foment a burgeoning movement for racial justice, despite circulation that only reached a relatively small — though active and engaged — portion of the public. While papers like the *Defender* lacked the market penetration of mainstream publications, their reach and reputation within the black community afforded them an important role in the Civil Rights Movement. In covering the quotidian experiences of Black Americans living under Jim Crow, papers like the *Defender* validated those experiences. The stories gave voice to the struggle, in turn helping resistance movements gain momentum and power. The activist press, then, primarily served to incubate and reinforce growing civil rights sentiment, rather than disseminate facts and information to capture attention from the broader public.

Myrdal's assertion in 1944 — that Jim Crow would surely crumble if only white Americans “knew the facts” — proved far from true. White southern editors knew the facts; it was simply not in their best interests to report them. When civil rights did become a story that made it to front pages and evening news broadcasts across the country, it wasn't thanks to the benevolence of a majority-white mainstream press — it took a powerful grassroots movement building significant moral and political pressure and an activist press setting a clear agenda for the future of race relations in America.

While each serves its own role, the dialectic between these three forces — an activist press shedding light on elided stories of injustice, a grassroots movement building

⁵ Michaeli, Ethan. *The Defender: How the Legendary Black Newspaper Changed America, From the Age of the Pullman Porters to the Age of Obama*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016).

political power around those stories, and a mainstream press ultimately acknowledging and amplifying those stories in response to grassroots pressure — has acted as a powerful engine for policy change around issues of race. When working in concert with people-powered social movements, the media have had a profound impact on the history of social movements and their political victories by taking the demands of the people from the streets to the policy sphere. From Jim Crow to mass incarceration, from Black Power to Black Lives Matter, social movements have been mediated through both mainstream and activist press, acting not as a filter, but as a megaphone for transformative political change. With the rise in journalistic functions of nontraditional and networked media, the megaphone has only gotten louder.

II. “The press may or may not come.”

Civil rights movement leaders succeeded at gaining the attention of the mainstream press and the nation. The Race Beat became the biggest story in the country.

The narrative of the civil rights struggle amplified and reinforced the ideals journalists espoused of themselves. In her book *Framing the Panthers*, Jane Rhodes writes, “The press customarily framed stories about the civil rights movement within binary oppositions that reproduced the standards and values of American journalism: good versus evil, justice versus injustice, North versus South.”⁶

During the heroic period of civil rights, the media frame was clear. Activists and movement leaders had created an environment where the brutality of racial injustice could no longer be ignored. There was a clear right and wrong side to history, and journalists, as well as policymakers, wanted to position themselves on the right side.

The dialectic of the movement and the media built sufficient public and political pressure to bring about the most sweeping legislative racial reforms in American history. National media attention forged the iconic, indelible images of the civil rights struggle into the American consciousness, but not without strategic manipulation from civil rights leaders. Activists knew the 1963 children’s crusade, a student-led march against segregation, would be met with brutal violence from Birmingham’s public safety commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor. They also knew images of children being beaten, hosed, and attacked by police dogs would permeate the news cycle and mainstream America’s conscience. The movement guided the press to amplify its message, ultimately generating the political will needed for Lyndon B. Johnson to pass the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964.

⁶ Rhodes, Jane. *Framing the Black Panthers: The Spectacular Rise of a Black Power Icon*. (New York: The New Press, 2007).

But the mainstream media's ability to champion civil rights causes would soon reach its limits.

On June 16, 1966, at the March Against Fear in Greenwood, Mississippi, Stokely Carmichael broke the frame within which mainstream media had confined civil rights: "We been saying freedom for six years and we ain't got nothing. What we gonna start saying now is Black Power!"⁷

As activists at the center of Race Beat became less conciliatory toward white audiences and evolved past a message of nonviolent resistance, mainstream press coverage faced an uncomfortable shift. Part of the problem was pathology within newsrooms. The press in the 1960s was in a period of disruption. Competition among print media outlets was waning. Television was emerging as a disruptive new market that threatened newspapers' bottom lines. And the color line persisted: Newsrooms were majority white and male.⁸

Suddenly, these mostly white mainstream newsrooms found it more difficult to take sides. Fueled by racial fear and anxiety about black protest, mainstream press developed a new frame to explain black power: "responsible versus irresponsible" means of fighting for racial justice.⁹ After Carmichael's speech, mainstream coverage of racial justice activism became increasingly critical as the movement for civil rights shifted toward one for black liberation. TV news coverage showed King and Carmichael openly disagreeing about the path the movement should take. Peniel E. Joseph writes in *Dark Days, Bright Nights*,

Marching side by side, Carmichael and King were opposites both physically and in temperament. Tall, lanky, and restless, Carmichael laconically informed reporters that he held no personal commitment to nonviolence and that he saw it as little more than a political tactic. Meanwhile, the disciplined and diminutive

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ Rhodes (2007).

King politely disagreed, maintaining an outward appearance of self-control that had been honed over a decade in the national spotlight.¹⁰

Carmichael and King's divergence on movement strategy took center stage in coverage of the March Against Fear because it allowed the mainstream media to shift back into a familiar narrative: the right versus wrong tactics, good versus bad activists, acceptable versus unacceptable ways to demand change.

Today, reporting on King's legacy is still distorted by this frame, holding up the radical pastor from Alabama as the respectable counterexample to Carmichael, Malcolm X, and other leaders whose messages were less palatable to white America. It made good copy, but it wasn't the truth.

As Joseph points out, King's speech at the Greenwood rally in 1966 "defined power as the 'ability to make the power structure say yes even when it wants to say no' — a development that the *Los Angeles Times* suggested made Carmichael and King appear as speaking 'with almost one voice.'"¹¹ But most coverage of the emerging movement for black power continued to pit the two men as opposing forces within a fracturing movement.

Both King and Carmichael were masters at managing the press, but here, too, their strategies differed. King played into media frames of equality, respectability, and freedom. During the heroic period of civil rights, activists staged marches and rallies, always in their Sunday best. The media loved him. Carmichael refused to reinforce media frames, managing the press with calm defiance. At a June 30 press conference following the March Against Fear, Carmichael refused to answer questions from the press about disagreements between Carmichael's Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and

¹⁰ Joseph, Peniel E. *Dark Days, Bright Nights: From Black Power to Barack Obama*. (New York: BasicCivitas, 2010).

¹¹ Joseph (2010).

other civil rights groups, declaring, “the press in this country will not decide what our press conferences will be. The press may or may not come.”¹²

But Carmichael’s recalcitrance toward the media hardly dissuaded reporters from covering him. The sensationalist draw of black power seized the attention of a stagnating mainstream press that largely failed to rise to the demands of the new movement. By 1967, President Lyndon B. Johnson’s National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, known as the Kerner commission, concluded “the news media have failed to analyze and report adequately on the racial problems in the United States and, as a related matter, to meet the Negro’s legitimate expectations in journalism.”¹³

As Rhodes wrote in *Framing the Panthers*, clashes between black power and the press also had powerful implications for how ideas of race were communicated and reproduced in the public sphere.¹⁴ Mainstream media were able to fall back on a distanced observer position that allowed them to communicate racially charged attitudes.

This veneer of neutrality and objectivity masked structural factors influencing media coverage. Consolidation among print outlets was homogenizing coverage, and growing competition among television stations encouraged sensationalism. An undercurrent of racial fear ran through all of it.

So Black Power activists turned to their own media. Drawing on the Marxist-Leninist idea of parallel institutions that informed the strategy of its political program, the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense circulated the *Black Panther* newspaper. While closer to propaganda than traditional journalism, the *Black Panther* played an important role in the BPP’s organizing, allowing activists to create and disseminate their own narratives about their movement.

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ Rhodes (2007).

¹⁴ *ibid.*

The *Black Panther* reprinted speeches and essays from the party's leaders and published the BPP's ten-point program in every issue, but it also reported regularly on progressive activism in the United States, the Vietnam War, and the growing Black Student Union movement on campuses nationwide. The paper informed its readers on relevant issues, but it also actively encouraged and precipitated political involvement, and created a unifying medium through which chapters of the BPP across the country could engage and connect with one another.¹⁵

At one point the *Black Panther* reached a circulation of more than 60,000 — small by mainstream standards, but sufficiently wide-reaching to raise consciousness among its target audiences. As historian Robyn Spencer noted in her book on the Oakland chapter of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense, *The Revolution Has Come*, distribution also provided steady income, as members kept a portion of the copies they sold. “The paper sold for twenty-five cents,” former Panther Bill Jennings said. “For every paper sold, the seller kept a dime. . . . You could live off the newspaper. Not only were you getting the word out to the community; you were maintaining yourself.”¹⁶

The *Black Panther* was a critical tool for the movement and served multiple functions that reinforced the BPP's mission and goals. It occupied a different role than the *Defender* and the established black press: Growing and framing the movement was its express goal. Spencer writes that the *Black Panther* helped maintain cohesion between chapters across the country and keep supporters informed on the BPP's activities as they were happening, not as they were being reported in the mainstream press.

Bob Ostertag describes the importance of movement publications like the *Black Panther* in his book *People's Movements, People's Press*. “Social movement journalism seeks to

¹⁵ Spencer, Robyn C. *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, And the Black Panther Party in Oakland*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

¹⁶ *ibid.*

promote ideas, not profits; movement journalists seek to challenge corporate control of media, not justify it. They address readers as members of communities, not individual consumers. They cover social movements as participants, not observers. They exist to make change, not business.”¹⁷ The *Black Panther*, for a time, succeeded at both.

¹⁷ Ostertag, Bob. *People's Movements, People's Press: The Journalism of Social Justice Movements*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007).

III. “If you call it a riot”

But despite the presence and impact of movement journalism within its realm of influence, racial fear continued to play a defining role in mainstream political rhetoric and reporting. The BPP was portrayed as a particular threat to (white) liberal democratic American society and values. The Panthers were armed black communists — three classes that mainstream media never had a chance of looking past. Rhodes writes:

The national press was profoundly influenced by its own fears and repulsion, the rhetoric of conspiracy used by political figures such as J. Edgar Hoover, and the Panthers’ considerable efforts at spin control. The press failed to differentiate between the theatrics and hyperbole of the Black Panther Party and any real threat they presented to individual whites or to national security. Rather, the coverage registered white Americans’ shock and dismay over the Panthers’ style of protest. During this early period, the press, like FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, seemed to dread the *potential* of the Black Panther Party — the possibility that this movement could spread to disaffected black youth nationwide.¹⁸

In the late 1960s, the Race Beat was still among the biggest stories in American journalism. Covering the Panthers put the mainstream press in a contradictory position: While they had an interest in promoting racial progress within their own frames, they also were beholden to the dominant institutions of political and economic power that gave them legitimacy. The Panthers took aim at those institutions, and the mainstream press, perceiving an existential threat, marginalized those critiques. The media were drawn to both cover and criticize the Panthers in ways that had lasting impacts on political rhetoric around race and criminality.

Within a year of passing the landmark Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act, the famed pragmatist Lyndon B. Johnson pushed a measure that allowed the federal government to ramp up policing in newly integrated communities. The impacts of the Law Enforcement

¹⁸ Rhodes (2007).

Assistance Act of 1965 and its subsequent reiterations reverberate today in communities of color, where police presence is a constant reminder that residents are living in occupied territory. It is arguably among the most lasting components of Johnson's legacy.

Patrisse Khan-Cullors, one of the queer black women organizers who founded the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag and launched the Movement for Black Lives, writes in her memoir:

Another story that does not get told when they tell the story of California is the story of occupation, of what it means for so many of us who are Black or Latinx to live unable to escape the constant monitoring by police, the idea that our very existence, the brown of your skin, is enough to get you snatched up, enough to get you killed.¹⁹

In 1971, Richard Milhous Nixon launched a war on drugs, a specter that also haunts American race relations and institutions of law enforcement and criminal justice half a century later. Slowly but surely, through measured political calculation and strategic racism, crime became racialized, and, by extension, race became criminalized. Nixon's national domestic policy chief, John Ehrlichman, later confessed the so-called war on drugs was a canard used to command and control communities engaging in civil unrest:

We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin. And then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did.²⁰

¹⁹ Khan-Cullors, Patrisse and asha bandele. *When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2018). Kindle edition

²⁰ Baum, Dan. Legalize it all: How to win the war on drugs." *Harper's Magazine* (April 2016).

As Ian Haney-López argues, Nixon’s dog whistle trained (white) America well. It allowed politicians to create a sort of racism without racists by using coded racial appeals — a strategy that both political parties would come to adopt. The media, couched as a distanced observer, scarcely confronted this new implicit bias and, the more entrenched it became into political structures and rhetoric, often reinforced it.²¹

On April 29, 1992, an all-white jury acquitted four LAPD officers for brutally beating Rodney King. A witness had sent a video of the beating to local news stations, and the footage aired around the world. Ibram X. Kendi writes: “The millions of viewers of the beating were told that those officers had done nothing wrong. With justice denied them in the courts, Black and Brown residents rushed to claim justice in the Los Angeles streets.”²²

The famous 1992 Los Angeles Riots that followed dominated the media and ushered in a new age of networked police brutality. The tonality of the coverage revealed deep implicit bias associating black and brown bodies with criminality. The mainstream press, intentionally or not, answered Nixon’s dog whistle.

Even the word “riots” revealed bias. Maxine Waters, at the time a newly elected member of Congress from South Central Los Angeles, pointed out the connotation: “If you call it a riot it sounds like it was just a bunch of crazy people who went out and did bad things for no reason” rather than a “somewhat understandable, if not acceptable[,]... spontaneous reaction to a lot of injustice.”²³

Bill Clinton was campaigning as a “tough-on-crime” Democrat by adopting the coded racism — and fiscal policy — championed by Nixon and Ronald Reagan. Kendi writes:

²¹ Haney-López, Ian. *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

²² Kendi (2014).

²³ *ibid.*

“The New Democrat Bill Clinton blamed both political parties for failing urban America before blasting the ‘savage behavior’ of ‘lawless vandals’ who ‘do not share our values,’ whose ‘children are growing up in a culture alien from ours, without families, without neighborhood, without church or support.’”²⁴

The news media reinforced these stereotypes. In a 2017 study, Joy Leopold and Myrtle P. Bell introduced the “protest paradigm” — “a pattern of news coverage that expresses disapproval toward protests and dissent.”²⁵ The researchers assessed mainstream coverage of uprisings in the aftermath Michael Brown’s death at the hands of police in Ferguson, Missouri, and found that the protest paradigm was present and highly racialized.

Two solutions Leopold and Bell propose: monitoring coverage for coded racial language, and increasing racial diversity in newsrooms. Even now, 60 years after the shift from civil rights to black power, newsrooms are predominantly white, especially at established mainstream publications. Demonstrations are still declared riots, and coded racial language still pervades mainstream media coverage.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Joy Leopold, Myrtle P. Bell, (2017) "News media and the racialization of protest: an analysis of Black Lives Matter articles", Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal, Vol. 36 Issue: 8, pp.720-735

IV. Witness

On February 6, 2012, an armed neighborhood watch officer shot and killed Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old black high school student in Miami Gardens, Florida. Martin was unarmed. He was walking in his own neighborhood, carrying Skittles and an Arizona Iced Tea. He was wearing a hoodie. These facts are now widely known and circulated. But before Martin's death sparked a movement, many feared he would become another name on the long list of black boys and girls killed in America whose deaths have not received justice.

Patrisse Khan-Cullors writes in her memoir:

We are scared because Trayvon's beautiful life and terrible death is meant to be erased; the reporting of it made no front-page news, no *Dateline*, no Anderson Cooper. The story on my Facebook feed was a tiny blog post, a post not connected with mainstream media. A white man is questioned and then released after he shoots and kills an unarmed Black boy who was walking home. And in that instant I was filled with rage and confusion. Was this 2012 or 1955? We could be talking about Emmett Till.²⁶

Khan-Cullors responded to that post with a hashtag that now defines a movement: #BlackLivesMatter. The founding of #BlackLivesMatter (BLM) hashtag, independent of traditional media, unleashed a new set of tools for movements to amplify their message.

On July 6, 2016, Diamond Reynolds and her boyfriend Philando Castile were pulled over for a broken taillight. The officer asked for Castile's registration. Before reaching for the glove compartment of the car, Castile stated that he had a license to carry a concealed weapon. When he reached to retrieve the registration, the officer fatally shot him. Reynolds' daughter was in the backseat. Reynolds took out her phone and started recording her grief and terror, and broadcast it live on her Facebook page.

²⁶ Khan-Cullors (2018).

“She is going to force people to bear witness to this and to see something that has largely been rendered as being invisible in this country,” Nikole Hannah-Jones, racial injustice correspondent for the *New York Times Magazine*, said in an interview for *Hope & Fury*.

Reynolds, like Mamie Till, brought an entire nation into her grief.

It is easy to feel as if nothing has changed. 2014, the year the signal fire of BLM flared in Ferguson, Missouri, marked 50 years since James Baldwin published his seminal essay on race, *The Fire Next Time*, in which he wrote:

This past, this endless struggle to achieve and reveal and confirm a human identity, human authority, yet contains, for all its horror, something very beautiful . . . Everything now, we must assume, is in our hands; we have no right to assume otherwise. If we — and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of others — do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world.²⁷

Today, at least the power to shape the narrative is in the hands of racial justice activists. Activists and social movements work in dialectic with multiple forms of media, from mainstream press to movement publications to user-driven social media platforms, to broadcast and reinforce their stories, their message, and their policy agenda. BLM activists have more resources at hand to share stories and create consciousness than ever before.

²⁷ Ward, Jesmyn (ed). *The Fire This Time: A New Generation Speaks About Race*. (New York: Scribner, 2016).

Social media proved particularly effective for BLM activists, who successfully harnessed Facebook and Twitter to broadcast their message in response to perceived bias in coverage of the movement from mainstream media. Their skills in managing the press have empowered and enabled activists to engage in “resistance from within,” utilizing knowledge of media systems to shift coverage frames by broadcasting their own stories.

²⁸ By manufacturing crisis, BLM activists have managed to dominate headlines.

“Dr. King said you have to create a crisis so that the power structures are forced to answer,” Brittany Packnett, a Movement for Black Lives activist, said in an interview for *Hope & Fury*. Her role, Packnett said, is to take “demands from the street” and turn them into policy.²⁹

The Movement for Black Lives, in contrast to the racial justice movements of the 1960s and 1970s, is less reliant on traditional forms of media to transmit its goals and message to the public sphere.

MSNBC host Chris Hayes said in an interview for *Hope & Fury*: “Why do you need me, white television host from New York, to be the person who points a camera at your protest? People have a lot more control over their stories, and that’s profound and powerful.”³⁰

Social media platforms have provided a powerful venue to create the consciousness and community Baldwin called for. Jesmyn Ward wrote in *The Fire This Time*, an updated collection of essays inspired by Baldwin’s work: “After George Zimmerman shot and killed Trayvon Martin on February 26, 2012, I took to Twitter. I didn’t have anywhere

²⁸ Cammaerts, Bart; Mattoni, Alice; and McCurdy, Patrick. *Mediation and protest movements*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013).

²⁹ *Hope & Fury* (2018).

³⁰ *ibid.*

else to go. I wanted to hear what others, black writers and activists, were thinking about what happened in Sanford, Florida.”³¹

The breakdown in traditional access points to media hasn't just bolstered justice-oriented social movements. Increased democratization of information and publicity through social media and other alternative publications has also allowed right-wing subcultures to thrive.

Angela Nagle argues that the declining power of mainstream media to serve as political gatekeepers in this distributed media environment contributed to an outcome in the 2016 presidential election that few in the mainstream media saw coming: “The year 2016 may be remembered as the year the media mainstream’s hold over formal politics died. A thousand Trump Pepe memes bloomed and a strongman larger-than-life Twitter troll who showed open hostility to the mainstream media and to both party establishments took The White House without them.”³²

Activists and nontraditional actors on both sides of the political spectrum are changing the meaning and influence of journalism in political processes, through direct content production in nontraditional publications or on social media and by influencing the content and focus of mainstream news coverage. Adrienne Russell argues that this shift is having profound impacts on how citizens participate in the public sphere and engage with political power: “Activists are part of an informal movement in which journalism is being taken up beyond the professional centers of news production and in which a wider, more diverse set of actors influence the flow and content of news. Activists are in that way, and

³¹ Ward (2016).

³² Nagle, Angela. *Kill All Normies: The online culture wars from Tumblr and 4chan to the alt-right and Trump*. (United Kingdom: Zero Books, 2017).

by design, influencing the means by which we engage with one another and with those in power.”³³

Distributed sources of news and information and the ways in which activists engage with these sources have shifted the dialectic of media power, democratizing access to sources of media and information. But they have also acted as a disruptive force on the market for news and information, contributing to a growing trend of struggling news outlets becoming concentrated into fewer and fewer hands, and the narrative more and more homogenous.

³³ Russell, Adrienne. *Journalism as Activism: Recoding Media Power*. (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 2016.)

V. “Dissent, brought to you by monopolists.”

Six corporations own 90% of America’s media, a number that has been steadily declining over the last three decades.³⁴ While particularly egregious and noticeable in the media market, this trend has affected the economy at large.

Since the late 1970s, policymakers have slowly been chipping away at protections against economic centralization, allowing a handful of companies to control large sectors of the economy. Economist and political scientist Matt Stoller writes:

Monopoly — the ultimate enemy of free-market competition — now pervades every corner of American life: every transaction we make, every product we consume, every news story we read, every piece of data we download. ... What drives monopolization is not business know-how or technological innovation, but public policy — a political environment that permits or even enables an investor like Jeff Bezos to engage in a massive accumulation of economic power.³⁵

The past three presidents have declined to bring a single anti-monopoly suit against a U.S. corporation. Companies like Amazon drive down competition by absorbing or replacing it, eliminating consumer choice. And their reach is not confined to one industry. Monopolization also threatens democratic institutions, especially the free press. Jeff Bezos, billionaire owner of Amazon, now controls the Washington Post, the nation’s self-proclaimed watchdog of democracy. Stoller points out the irony: “Dissent, brought to you by monopolists.”³⁶

In 2017, the Federal Communications Commission repealed the Main Studio Rule, a policy enacted in nearly 80 earlier that required media companies who own television and

³⁴ Lutz, Ashley. “These 6 corporations control 90% of the media in America.” *Business Insider*. 14 Jun. 2012. <https://www.businessinsider.com/these-6-corporations-control-90-of-the-media-in-america-2012-6>

³⁵ Stoller, Matt. The Return of Monopoly. 13 July 2017. *The New Republic*. <https://newrepublic.com/article/143595/return-monopoly-amazon-rise-business-tycoon-white-house-democrats-return-party-trust-busting-roots>

³⁶ *ibid.*

radio stations to operate physical studios in the communities where the stations are located. Lee Fang reported for *The Intercept* that companies lobbying in favor of the repeal argued “social media renders local stations an anachronistic requirement of the past,” and “local studios are no longer necessary because stations today ‘are active on multiple social media platforms’ that allow them to interact with their audience.”³⁷

This of course is not true. While social media provides a platform and venue for citizens to engage in the public sphere, it does not supplant the role of traditional media, especially for transmitting preferences from the streets to the policy sphere in conjunction with social movements, which act as a check on the political power of the press as a democratic institution.

The argument that local news stations are no longer necessary because citizens gather information through social media also sheds light on the new dialectic between media and political power: Small groups of elite communications and political professionals manage the flow of information between people and the government. Those groups are already concentrated in Washington D.C., New York, state capitols, and major metropolitan areas. The clustering effect of media and political power has shaped how and why stories are told. As W. Lance Bennett *et al* argue, journalism has become a fight for nuance instead of accountability: “The short story here is that the press has grown too close to the sources of power in this nation, making it largely the communication mechanism of the government, not the people.”³⁸

Today’s mainstream media environment is readily explained by the “propaganda model” theory of press and political power introduced by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky in 1988. According to the propaganda model, the media are structurally

³⁷ Fang, Lee. “Fake news alert: Media conglomerates convince FCC that Facebook can replace local news stations.” *The Intercept*. 25 October 2017. <https://theintercept.com/2017/10/25/fcc-media-ownership-repeal-local-stations/>

³⁸ Bennet, W. Lance, Regina G. Lawrence, and Steven Livingston. *When the Press Fails: Political Power and the news Media from Iraq to Katrina*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

constrained and influenced by the powerful economic, political, and social actors that contain them. According to Herman and Chomsky, these powerful actors “shape and constrain media policy” toward their own agendas through structural factors like direct ownership, advertising revenue, and relationships between those who make the news and those who report it.³⁹

These factors create a “guided market system,” they write, where the influences of power are internalized: “[M]oney and power are able to filter out the news fit to print, marginalize dissent, and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their messages across to the public. ... the constraints are so powerful, and are built into the system in such a fundamental way, that alternative bases of news choices are hardly imaginable.”⁴⁰

This model essentially leads to a different type of propaganda, whereby the press is Constitutionally free but structurally not free from the influence of the economic power structures with which it’s intertwined.

But the ability of movement leaders to leverage power and skill to manage the press to force those structures to do what they want constitutes a critical part of the dialectic of media coverage and policy driven by mass social movements. Within and because of those movements, alternative media choices do exist and can have profound impacts on the mainstream at particular moments of transference. From movement media to social networks, alternative means of content production and dissemination can exert influence and break through to the mainstream narrative when driven by grassroots social movements. Those moments, like the photos of Emmett Till’s funeral and video of Philando Castile’s death, have the power to leave an indelible imprint on public consciousness and contribute to changes in government policy.

³⁹ Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988 and 2002).

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

VI. “The movement and the story of the movement, which are the same thing, continue.”⁴¹

Journalism is at its best when it is at its most democratic — when it is closest to the people, and furthest from the structures that shape and constrain exercise of political power in the United States. Journalist and activist Amy Goodman calls for a new media that centers the voices of the “silenced majority,” rooted in the tradition of realism: “We need a media that covers grassroots movements, that seeks to understand and explain the complex forces that shape our society, a media that empowers people with information to make sound decisions on the most vital issues of the day: war and peace, life and death.”⁴²

When these issues are not covered, the mainstream press perpetuates the impression that they do not matter. Bernie Sanders wrote in a 2017 op-ed: “When there is very little coverage of the suffering of the 43 million Americans living in poverty, or the thousands of Americans without health insurance who die each year because they can’t get to a doctor when they should, corporately owned media is telling us that these are not issues of major concern.”⁴³

When black and brown faces only make the evening news in association with criminality while the police killings of unarmed black men, women, and children are only covered as context for the ensuing riots, disappearing from the news when the rally cries fade and erupting back to life with the same headlines when the jury clears officers of all charges, the mainstream media sends the message that black lives do not matter. A massive grassroots movement asserted that they do. It is the job of the press to amplify that message and, for perhaps the first time, make sure it is reflected in policy.

⁴¹ Khan-Cullors (2018).

⁴² Amy Goodman and Denis Moynihan. “The Silenced Majority: Stories of Uprisings, Occupations, Resistance, and Hope.” 2012. (Chicago: Haymarket Books.)

⁴³ Sanders, Bernie. How Corporate Media Threatens Our Democracy. *In These Times*. 26 Jan. 2017. <http://inthesetimes.com/features/bernie-sanders-corporate-media-threatens-our-democracy.html>

The power of the press today thus lies in its ability to amplify, not filter, news from the people to the policy sphere. To protect that power, media policy must first break the propaganda model. For at least the last decade, the status quo for the American press has been one of financial struggle and hardship. One survival strategy has been increasing corporate ownership and monopolization. But it is not the only strategy. Financial stress can also create opportunities for innovation. Instead of struggling to compete with social media and networked sources of news and information, some publications have successfully carved out market shares and forged new business models.

One example is the nonprofit model implemented at the *Texas Tribune* and the *Texas Observer*, among others. By incorporating as nonprofits instead of for-profit companies, these papers have opened the door to new revenue streams and fundraising, reducing reliance on advertising profits. Another example is the advocacy model, deployed by Amy Goodman's *Democracy Now!* and Glen Greenwald's the *Intercept*, where independence from corporate influence is just as important to the publication's mission as it is to its business model. A third strategy: alternative publications, like *Mother Jones*, *Jacobin*, the *Nation*, the *Economist*, *National Review*, and even *Breitbart* on the extreme right, all of which tailor content to specific interest groups.

Still, these publications are the exception, not the rule, and the market share for alternate news strategies is comparatively small. Policymakers can reintroduce real competition to the media marketplace by resurrecting aggressive anti-trust enforcement that protects the autonomy of a free and democratic press — not just from government but also from corporate ownership. Policy should ensure the press is not only free to operate without government infringement, but also free from corporate influence and control.

Finally, social media has shown the potential for stories in the activist tradition to break into the mainstream, but distributed media alone is not the answer. The period of disruption in the industry caused by social media can also be a period of innovation.

Mainstream media, not just the activist press, must invest in bread-and-butter issues reporting. It matters what, how, when, why, and by whom stories get told. People have the means to broadcast their own stories. Everything, now, is in our hands. The press can regain its power by seeking to amplify, not filter, the story of the movement.

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