Personal reflections on 50 years of radical media

John DH Downing

Southern Illinois University

I began to use – I detest ‘consume’ – small-scale media 50 years back, living in the rather Disunited Kingdom. Peter Watkins’ 1965 neo-realist docudrama The War Game, exposing British viewers to the realities of a nuclear attack and the government’s absurd civil defence preparations, was canned by the BBC under government pressure, but got screened in a single small Soho cinema. Meanwhile, for six months in working-class Stepney in docklands London, I reported for, edited, did the layout for, negotiated with the printers about and schlepped around pubs selling a monthly community newspaper (Step Ahoy). Penguin Books began publishing a slew of incendiary paperbacks, such as Frantz Fanon’s The Wretched of the Earth. Stepney public library had The Autobiography of Malcolm X available straight after its UK publication. Pirate radio stations, moored outside the then 12-mile territorial limit of the UK’s legislative domain, began broadcasting rock music all day and night, a different universe from the generally sedate and placid BBC. Oz magazine appeared in 1967, The Black Dwarf in 1968. ‘Northern’ social realist movies had preceded all these (over 1960–62, for example, Saturday Night and Sunday Morning; Taste of Honey; The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner). They were called ‘Northern’ because they were set in the north of England, but in their unromantic yet gripping depictions of working-class life – in those years I was living in the Yorkshire coal-mining area – they served to up-end the miserable snotty-minded values redolent of respectable folk, south or north. Occasionally, the satirical and sometimes surrealist strain in British culture also survived, especially in the theatre, even once in a while on the BBC (That Was The Week That Was, 1962–63, which got canned in the run-up to 1964’s national election).

I’ve drawn this rapid-fire portrait in order to sketch an alternative-media access scenario contrasting sharply with the one we live in today (and to reflect on how my own take on these matters has been shaped). Five-plus decades have rolled by and the media-sphere has become significantly reconfigured. For social movement media, structural (political-economic) imbalances have also become reconfigured. But they have not melted away, notwithstanding the dizzy visions of some writers concerning the democratic nirvana they foresaw in the internet, the web and mobile media.

What, then, have internet, social media and smartphone uses done to reconfigure social movement media options – and challenges – in the 15 years since the second English-language version of Radical Media? The chapter by Tamara Villarreal Ford and Genève Gil begins with enthusiasm concerning the potential of the internet for democratising communication, but also carefully underscores the drive to make online information harder to access and thereby profitable, and the arrival of the ‘infowar’. The main illustrations are drawn from the Zapatista movement’s uses of the internet, and the Institute for Global Communications, a formative earlier influence in the United States regarding radical uses of the internet.

* Email: jdowning@siu.edu
The decisive change for the better, in my judgement, has been in the capacity to make and distribute media and receive feedback. The only communication technology in my list of 50 years back with which I could create media was that very short-run little community paper. I had to distribute it from pub to pub (not altogether a hardship …). Feedback was random and infrequent. In the United States in the 1970s and 1980s, many fine documentaries were made about the menacing United States–Soviet Union nuclear stand-off, and about their proxy wars in Central America, but there was zero by way of wide distribution for them. It was not quite bicycle distribution, but not far from it. The Deep Dish video collective was the first ever project to rent transponder time in 1986, enabling 300 or so tiny community video-access sites in the United States to download its ‘crowd-made’ political documentaries. The emergence of the Indymedia Collective network out of the epic 1999 Seattle WTO protests came too late to address in Radical Media’s second version, but its dramatic exploitation of connectivity to enable news and pictures of social justice movement protests to be exchanged around the planet was extraordinary, not least in its degree of multilingualism and its advanced degree of open access to post items and respond to them.

Nonetheless, the 2005 advent of YouTube was indeed a distribution game-changer, not least its humungous searchable archive. Access to a vast amount of uncensored information, access to post, multilingualism: these dimensions – albeit hemmed in by intellectual property attack-dogs – generate astonishing affordances. And while Wikipedia in no way sets out to have a radical social justice agenda, its 42+ million contributors in multilingual Wikipedias have generated unprecedented free opportunities for discovery and fresh creation for people with social justice goals (and, evidently, neo-Nazis and their like).

Within the same short timespan, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and their analogues around the planet demonstrated their extraordinary and unanticipated affordances in many situations: Iran in the rigged 2009 election confrontations, in the ‘Arab Spring’ movements, the Occupy movement, Spain’s and Greece’s upsurges, México’s 2012 Yo Soy 132 movement, Turkey’s 2013 Gezi Park protests, Brazil’s huge 2014 anti-World Cup protests, the 2015 SOS Blak Australia movement, to name but a few.

There is no question that there has been remarkable growth in opportunities for mass political education, for information distribution of many kinds, for horizontal exchange, and – not least – for rapid political mobilisation in crises. This last aspect, however, has been far too much of a head-spinner for some – for example, the Western techno-hurrahs in 2011 who fused antique stereotypes of hyper-emotional Arabs with their own techno-highs to predict instantaneous political freedom for Egypt. How many tweets does it take to close an Egyptian jail (or an American one, if it comes to that)?

So, inexorably, we have to confront structural (political-economic) imbalances and their reconfiguration. The Edward Snowden files’ confirmation of massive surveillance, and of US and UK governments’ enforced top-secret collaboration with key telecoms and social media firms; the Chinese government’s internet police, and its block on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Wikipedia and more (plus its enthusiastic imitators in Russia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Rwanda and elsewhere); bomber-drones; US platform imperialism; and, in general, global corporate hegemony over computer codes, telecoms infrastructure and intellectual property: media activism has to engage energetically with information policy activism.

This dual reality could be framed in terms of mortal combat between two generalisations: an ultimately unstoppable evolution towards communication democracy; or the fatalistic ‘thermodynamic’ notion of an equal and opposite deadening reaction to a major action (the democratic affordances of the internet and smartphones). It would be very unhelpful to frame the issue in this way, however, because both evolution and a Manichean struggle between light and darkness eternalise the issues. They leave untouched the capacity – not the inevitability –
for myriad forms of collective social ingenuity to play their part in subverting these strictures, not to mention the capacity for overreach and miscalculation of those in power.

The acid test at this point is, I suggest, to devise ways of developing internet and smartphone technologies to help collectively generate workable economic, cultural and political alternatives in a globalised planet. Rapid mobilisation has been a remarkable, heady phenomenon, though still demanding huge social energy, but the challenge to forge other worlds is far, far greater. In other words, it is an unromantic, difficult, probably very long-term agenda indeed, with very deep roots. All social movement media formats will be central to this process. Encrypting our internet communications, as urged by Snowden and many others, will be essential, as will a pronounced sense of humour and of the absurd.