

## **Abstract**

### **Part of the problem? Meditations on mediation and the politics of Web 2.0**

Many characteristics attributed to Web 2.0 – such as interactivity and information sharing between users – have already been widely written about in the study of the media/social movement dynamic. This paper argues that a shortcoming of much of this research is that it places too much emphasis and even romanticises internet aspects of the media/movement dynamic while disregarding any overlap or interaction with mainstream media. Consequently, any efforts to establish a “web politics 2.0” within media/social movements related research must avoid simply fetishizing a catchphrase and adequately address these shortcomings in the existing body of research.

In order to address these shortcomings, media should be viewed as a multilayer, overlapping and fluid process that institutions and social actors are both embedded in and reflexively engage with. To this end, this paper applies a mediation approach to the study the media-oriented practices of the Dissent! network and specifically the CounterSpin Collective in their planning for and interaction with media at the 2005 G8 Summit. The analysis highlights both how interactive elements of the internet are applied by activists and just as importantly, how these overlap with mainstream media practices. The paper concludes with a summation of the applied theoretical model and argues that such an approach may provide one theoretical avenue to incorporate elements of “Web 2.0” while also addressing the shortcomings of the current literature.

This paper contributes to conference themes on theorizing Web 2.0, activism and civil society engagement through an analysis of the media practices of the Dissent! network in their mobilisation against the 2005 G8 Summit in Gleneagles, Scotland. The paper is based on the analysis of data gained during a year and a half of online and on the ground participant observation with Dissent, a series of 30 qualitative interviews.

## Part of the problem? Meditations on mediation and the politics of Web 2.0

### Introduction

I must apologise that this is the only day of the conference that I could attend due to teaching commitments so I am not sure what ground has already been covered

My placement in this session too is perhaps unfortunate, not because I am not interested in the work of my colleagues, by the paper itself deals with issues of activism and how to think about activist and social movements in the context of the so called new Web 2.0 politics.

At the same time the panels about activism going on in the other rooms are themed around the cringe worthy title of “Web 2.0 Activism”. This is not a comment on the papers being given, but this idea of web 2.0 activism and the problem with giving currency to the concept of “Web 2.0” itself.

In 2006, Time magazine declared its person of the year as “you” and the “community and collaboration” that was occurring on a scale never scene before<sup>1</sup>. The piece sought to recognise the mainstream of the use of so called web 2.0 applications by individuals, the focus could be said to be on their new media practices.

I will return to the idea practice but want to first situate the discussion specifically in the context of social movement research. While some comments may be relevant outside of this, the points I wish to make are within the study of the relationship between social movements and the media.

The point I want to make is a rather simple and perhaps an obvious one. Social movement’s use of new technologies have been studied and written about for the better part of 15 years. Granted the technology has changed during this time and facilitated additional uses but this type of activist practice is not new in and of itself.

This claim is not intended to be hyper critical or accusatory of those present, but instead intended to be polemic.

The danger of declaring a new Web 2.0 for social sciences is a slide into jingoism. The potential of creating a post-new media flag we can all sail under. While it may provide an umbrella term to organise a conference around, the concept may offer little conceptually beyond aesthetic sloganism

Instead of pouring efforts into studying whether or not there is a Web 2.0 of politics, there needs to be a shift to consider how the uses of the Internet and digital media fold into an overall media practice. Despite there being an established tradition of the uses of ICT by social movements, these are often

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1569514,00.html>

## Part of the problem? Meditations on mediation and the politics of Web 2.0

studied in isolation, and there is a failure to position ICTs as overlapping with mainstream media use and also within a more general political practice

In order to make this call, it is helpful to briefly situate these claims in a view of Web 2.0 and relevant studies of the relationship between media and social movements.

I will do this first by briefly looking at claims of Web 2.0 and then past studies of social movement literature, links to Web 2.0 claims and study practices in the context of the 2005 G8 Summit

### Defining Web 2.0 – Claims of what it is

Soon after the conference was announced, I emailed Andrew Chadwick to ask what basis he grounded the concept of a “Web 2.0 politics” in. I wanted to know if there was a specific definition he had in mind, or literature he was drawing on or basically what was meant by it. The response I got was friendly, and was essentially the concept was open to interpretation.

The most obvious benchmark comes from Tim O’Riley’s who is credited with coining the term “Web 2.0” in 2005. There is no doubt Tim has done well from this and has no doubt established himself a guru and secured lucrative sums on the consulting and lecture circuit.

O’Riley identified seven attributes of what differentiated Web 1.0 from Web 2.0, I won’t go through them now (Put them up on the screen?) but the thrust of his argument was that the web could be used as a “platform” to “harness collective intelligence.” The value of Web 2.0 was in how people used the web and the content created (pg 5, O’Riley). Web 2.0, he argued, had an implicit “architecture of participation”, a built in ethic of cooperation.

This is obviously where the idea of a new Web 2.0 of politics based on “participatory values” comes from. From O’Riley’s perspective, the potential of participation was a business opportunity to be seized by companies. Examples of Web 2.0 companies cited by O’Riley were things such as wikis, and *Wikipedia* specifically, *Flickr* and *Youtube*.

### Literature – Past Approaches

In March 2008, *First Monday* published a critical volume on the concept of Web 2.0<sup>2</sup>. In his critique of Web 2.0 in this volume David Silver convincingly argues “we need more history”<sup>3</sup>. We need to situate claims about Web 2.0 in a history of the past and not separate from it. If we do this with the history of the study

<sup>2</sup> See: <http://journals.uic.edu/fm/>

<sup>3</sup> See: <http://www.uic.edu/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2143/1950>

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## **Part of the problem? Meditations on mediation and the politics of Web 2.0**

between social movements and the use of ICTs there exists an established history.

Perhaps the most obvious example of is the rise of Indymedia, brought to prominence in the 1999 demonstrations against the WTO in Seattle and has since become a staple at similar summit style mobilisations. Indymedia offered an alternative platform for activists to post their own news, images, audio and video in wiki form and also allowed other users to comment on stories in true web 2.0 form.

Portfolio

Since Seattle, Indymedia has been studied intensely by academics<sup>4</sup>. This was happening at least 5 years before *Time* magazine named “you” as the person of the year and the concept of “web 2.0” was put forward and now over 9 years ago!

Yet it would be rather pedantic to argue specifics around the date of Web 2.0, this could easily be corrected by a footnote in the history books. Also of interest is the claim of new “participatory values”, is this new?

### **Participatory Values – More general question on links behind Web 2.0**

Well, much like Web 2.0, the meaning of participatory values could be debated. Jaros and Canon (1969) in an article published in 1969 defined participatory values as including, “norms about the desirability and obligatory nature of personally participating in civic affairs” (p. 95). Suffice to say the participatory values subsumed under the umbrella of democratic ideals discussed in Jaros and Canon’s article differ from the type of participation pushed by O’Riley. However, if we take the later approach we can again, looking at the history of social movement research to see how “new” it is.

If one looks at research into the relationship between social movements and the media, there are three general bodies of research:

- 1) Text-centred
- 2) Relational
- 3) New/Alternative media

Relevant for this discussion is the work on new/alternative media

### **New/Alternative Media Approaches**

This area is the most researched if the three . Such approaches have studied the use of ICTs even before Seattle, focussing on MAI protests and the use of the Internet by the Zapatistas among others<sup>5</sup>. The rise of the global justice movement has been paralleled by a rise in studies of this nature.

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<sup>5</sup> See:

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## **Part of the problem? Meditations on mediation and the politics of Web 2.0**

Work has often focussed on how social movement actors use new, computer-mediated and alternative media to plan and execute acts of political contention<sup>6</sup>. Within this and already mentioned, is the rise of Indymedia (See above). Arguments have also been made for the rise of new electronic forms of activism or “hacktivism”<sup>7</sup> exclusive to the internet creating “electronic repertoires of contention”<sup>8</sup>.

All of these works have clearly shown the impact of ICTs on social movements in terms of recruitment, mobilization and the execution of acts of political contention. There is no disputing the impact ICTs have had and this insight isn't necessarily new particularly in Western contexts. Reading through the titles and abstracts of many of the conference paper, a large majority seem to carry on this tradition by focussing on blogging, comparative analyses of web pages and online content, forums, information on the internet. Many of existing studies, and I am sure papers at this conference will illustrate levels of co-operation and participation the types of which could not have happened otherwise.

The literature has been effective in documenting this, yet a danger with much research in this vein is its perpetuation of a mass media/CMC binary within media/movement research. That is, by limiting one's focus to a specific technology such as computers, listervs or mobile phones, there is a danger of either placing too much emphasis on the utility of a technology or overlooking areas where one technology overlaps with another in the course of activity. In short, there is an overemphasis on the internet in isolation and a tendency to forget about political struggle taking place in the real world, factors which are undervalued in much of the current research<sup>9</sup>.

### **Media Practice, Mediation and the G8**

A remedy to this rests in the suggestion that an analysis of the uses – its production and consumption, of alternative media, any media for that matter, by social movement actors should be regarded as part of a larger activity which may be achieved conceptually through a mediation approach and the study of media practices.

By studying the practices of social movement actors and treating the interaction with media – all forms of media – as a process, one is able to account for both the use of computer-mediated communications and mass media in enactment of political action. Further, it can situate this within the nexus of physical political struggle.

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<sup>6</sup> See: .

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<sup>9</sup> See: Cammarts (2006) <http://www.ggf.be/pers/Cammaerts.pdf>

## Part of the problem? Meditations on mediation and the politics of Web 2.0

This claim rests on the premise that, even if it is argued there is a new politics of Web 2.0, it is not simply happening on the internet, it is happening in what Roger Silverstone coined the Mediapolis . There is a need then to view media as an overlapping, multilayer, fluid and messy process often expressed in the term “mediation”<sup>10</sup> a primarily methodological concept that seeks to shift how media is studied.

The idea of practices, which could in the context of this discussion, hold parallels with the resource mobilisation concept of “repertoires or contention”<sup>11</sup> can be used to study media as a process. While there isn’t time to go into a history of the topic, an article by Couldry provides a helpful introduction .

### Dissent! Towards Conclusion

By way of a conclusion, I want highlight some points for consideration by drawing up on the example of the 2005 G8 Summit, and specifically the Dissent! Network who was a stereotypical anti-capitalist network formed to facilitate demonstrations against the 2005 G8 Summit. Within Dissent!, the CounterSpin Collective emerged to field media interest within the confines of the network’s horizontal politics.

A study in the traditional new/alternative media approach might be like something along the lines of what Costanza-Chock hints at in the identification of a “conventional electronic repertoire of contention” which documents various uses of CMCs.

Such a study of Dissent and the CounterSpin collective specifically, would show the use of CMCs to “extend” communication efforts, as well as the using the listserv and stay in touch over large distances. It would also show the CMC to possess a “conventional electronic repertoire”, drawing again on Costanza-Chock’s terms of

- 1) Representation – through its use of a website
- 2) Information distribution – through the use of its listserv, to pass information between CSC, members, Dissent! Network members and also the media. Passing around media articles
- 3) Fundraising – efforts and appeals to secure funds and donated equipment to facilitate group activities
- 4) Research – Researching media outlets, contact information, journalist histories, past articles written. Media monitoring

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<sup>10</sup> ”

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## **Part of the problem? Meditations on mediation and the politics of Web 2.0**

The categories I have just gone through could be slightly revised but are simply illustrative. Of the type of study that could be done and the findings.

But what would be missing from this?

Focusing just on the electronic practices would miss the sharp divide between action in the lead up to the Summit and at the mobilisation itself when pretty much the electronic repertoire fell by the wayside though this point could arguably be incorporated into a broader analysis.

A focus on practice more generally also recognises that media is sought across platforms (internet, mainstream media) and referenced back again. Something is heard on the radio, identified on streaming radio, emailed around the group and a response letter is show. Mainstream newspapers are monitored electronically and letters to the editor are drafted and submitted electronically. An online/offline distinction loses out that these activities, in this case, part of a project to monitor how media covered Dissent!, took place in the mediapolis. The use of CMCs were an element of this.

The type of event under study has a lot to do with the argument being made, and much of the new/alternative media literature has emerged out of studies of similar summit style protests. The fact remains, the G8 Summits and related events, IMF, World Banks meetings are political media events. Mainstream media play an underwriting role at the event, regardless if embraced or not by activists and thus arguably has impact on their actions.

In his discussion of media practices, the crux of Couldry's argument is that what needs to be studied is how media impacts our everyday practices. In the case of this research it is about how media, ICT and mainstream media impact the planning an execution of acts of contentious politics. The new form of politics, which includes participation in politics, takes place in the mediapolis.

## **Conclusion**

The use of web 2.0 by name and potentially in practice has the potential to further drive a divide and misconception between old and new media. Even the division itself poses challenges for the discipline in thinking about media as an immersive environment we live in or a “media torrent” as Todd Gitlin described it, that we must navigate. As a closing anecdote, two years ago in San Francisco at the second annual Web 2.0 Conference hosted by O’Riley Media, a session was held on “Web 3.0: Defining What’s Next”. The possibilities of politics 2.0, 3.0 and so forth are limitless, yet where attention needs to be directed is not just drawing differences between a 1.0 and 2.0 politics as O’Riley does between websites. As I have argued, at least within the field of social movement studies, this is being done a lot. But towards seeing media as a process and studying the how the overlapping on/off line, mainstream/alternative, real/virtual, practices

## **Works Cited**