

# Mass Media and Social Movements

## A Critical Examination of the Relation Between the Mainstream Media and Social Movements

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Global Research, April 22, 2008

22 April 2008

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

Social movements come and go, represent all manner of political beliefs, and aim to achieve their political objectives by influencing a particular target group's opinion. Some groups reach out directly to just a few key decision makers or constituencies, while others act more indirectly by broadcasting their message to as wide an audience as possible.

Writing in 1993, [William Gamson](#) and [Gadi Wolfsfeld](#) suggested that social movements rely on the media for three main services, (1) mobilisation of political support, (2) legitimisation (or validation) in the mainstreams discourse, and (3) to broaden the scope of conflicts. [1] Consequently, the quality and nature of the media coverage that social movements obtain strongly influences how they are perceived in the public eye – to the extent that good or bad coverage can help to make or break a social movement.

Social movements that are long lived and effectively institutionalised within society, tend not to challenge the status quo directly, and so consequently are less dependent on media coverage for their survival.

However, media coverage may be crucial for other, less well known social movements whose often transitional and adversarial nature tends to weaken their ability to secure public legitimacy. Their outsider status – that is, their marginalisation from central political decision-making processes – along with their often resource-poor nature, means that traditional avenues of publicity are not easily accessible which forces them to rely on alternative methods to obtain media access. Traditionally, this involves some form of public spectacle – like a protest – to attract media attention.

Typical protest actions include sit-ins, pickets, street theatre, strikes, rallies, mass demonstrations and their more recent relative, reclaim the street parties. These activities have become accepted as mechanisms by which social problems are communicated in the public sphere, alongside public opinion polls and elections and they act as vital means by which citizens can signal their discontent. Consequently, the way that such protest activities are reported in the media is fundamental to the effectiveness of the feedback loop between the public and their politicians.

Unlike other 'legitimate' social groups, like the police and mainstream politicians, most social movements are not the focus of regular news beats. This means that unless social movements stage big public events, they struggle to get their message heard, as "the vast majority of demonstrations are ignored by the mainstream media" – particularly small demonstrations. [2] Governments are often openly critical of social movements that undermine their authority, but perhaps what is more damaging is the subtle nature of the

mass media's marginalisation of the activities of many social movements. [Linda Kensicki](#) highlighted some of these consequences:

"There are repeated cases of slanting, trivialisation, and outright omission of those who deviate from the norms of an elite media and form a political movement to combat injustice. Negative media frames have been discovered in the antinuclear movement, the women's movement (Barker-Plummer 1995), and the gay and lesbian movement, and the National Environmental Policy Act faced a media blackout." [3]

[Joseph Chan](#) and [Chin-Chuan Lee](#) first described the "protest paradigm" in 1984 to illustrate how the mass media tended to focus on limited features of social protests to portray protestors as the 'other'. [4] Characteristics of this reporting paradigm, which work to separate protestors (them) from non-protesting audiences (us, or at least some of us) include a reliance on official sources to frame the event, a focus on [police confrontation](#), and an analysis of the protestors activities (and appearances) rather than their objectives. This somewhat internalised selection process serves to filter which protests are reported, and which are ignored (for more on this, see my recent article, [Conform or Reform? Social Movements and the Mass Media](#)). Reporting within this paradigm typically gives the impression that protests "'erupt out of nowhere' and are 'irrational' manifestations of self-interest by sectional interest groups operating without concern for, and at the expense of, the 'organic whole' – the national interest." [5]

Understanding the relationship between social movements and the media's coverage of their actions is crucial, especially if this increasingly important political resource is to be utilised effectively for progressive social change. This article aims to analyse this pivotal relationship from two directions. Firstly, it will examine incidents where the media facilitates social change via protest actions within democratic countries, which will be followed by an examination of the media's role in catalysing major social change, that is, revolutions in authoritarian nations. Secondly, the article will chart the ways in which the media (in democratic countries) can act to undermine social movements in the public sphere. Finally, the article will attempt to understand why social movement protest coverage is so variable and conclude by making recommendations for how progressive organisations may best address their relationships with the media.

## **Media 'Supported' Social Movements**

Gaining positive media coverage is crucial for many social movements, as the way they are portrayed in the mass media can have important implications for their ability to mobilise citizens to participate in their protests. Indeed in 1987, social movement researchers Bert Klandermans and Dirk Oegema found that only 5% of the people who agreed with the objectives of a peace protest were motivated enough to participate in the subsequent protest. [6]

Despite such evident barriers to participation, in Belgium on 20 October 1996, a brand new social movement (formed in the wake of the controversy surrounding the arrest of murderer Marc Dutroux) mobilised the White March. What made this event remarkable was that the White March involved around 300,000 citizens and was Belgium's largest ever demonstration. Stefaan Walgrave and Jan Manssens studied the media coverage of this mobilisation and concluded that, contrary to most social movement research, it was the

media itself that made the White March successful. In fact, they described how the media “undertook large-scale and unconcealed motivational framing efforts” to actively break down barriers to participation. [7]

Similarly in Australia, the media took on an advocacy role for a protest in Australia when Howard Sattler, the host of a popular Australian talkback radio program, stirred up racist sentiments amongst his listeners, when a young indigenous boy was involved in a fatal hit and run car incident in 1991. Sattler heavily promoted a “Rally for Justice” amidst the ensuing “public hysteria” – generated for the most part from his radio show – which drew thirty thousand angry protestors on to the streets. Worryingly, the rally succeeded in pressuring the Australian government to “introduc[e] poorly framed, racist legislation which contravene[d] the Convention on Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights and possibly the *Racial Discrimination Act (1975)*”. [8]

One US group that seem to have their protest coverage (positively) amplified in the mass media is the Promise Keepers, “[an evangelical](#) men’s organization with an anti-feminist and anti-gay theology”. Dane Claussen analysed their coverage in US newspapers – from 1991 (their founding year) through to April 1996 – and concluded that it was “overwhelmingly positive”. [9] In fact, one of their protests in Washington DC received “[more than](#) three times the coverage” the television networks devoted to a women’s march held the day before, which was more than double its size.

Another example of contrasting media coverage can be seen in the reporting of the protests surrounding the US-led invasion of Iraq (in 2003). [Catherine Luther and Mark Miller](#) analysed pro-war and anti-war coverage in eight US newspapers and showed how reporters were more likely to use delegitimation cues when referring to anti-war protestors, while using legitimation cues to refer to pro-war campaigners. Recent anti-war protests held in the US (in September 2005) were downplayed by the media, when between 100,000 and 300,000 people marched through Washington DC. There were however, a few hundred pro-war protestors and the Washington Post amazingly managed to produce a headline that reported: “[Smaller but](#) spirited crowd protests antiwar march; more than 200 say they represent majority.” Clear Channel, the US media conglomerate took this one step further in the lead-up to the war in Iraq by “sponsoring and supporting” a number of pro-war rallies through its radio stations. The various examples of media-supported protests examined here, raise concerns over the role of the media in democracies. Yet even more startling questions arise in the following section, which demonstrates how the media can in some circumstances actually work to support social movements to overthrow governments.

## **Media-Facilitated Revolutions (and Democracy?)**

Since the recent revolution in Serbia, which ousted President Slobodan Milosevic in 2000, a series of ‘coloured revolutions’ have swept across Eastern Europe. These were the Rose revolution in Georgia (2003), the Orange revolution in Ukraine (2005) and the Tulip revolution in Kyrgyzstan (2005). In each case, after stolen elections, the media played an important role in catalysing public participation in mass protests, which led to success of each of the revolutions. This section will outline, the integral role the independent media played in each of these four revolutions (for further background information on the nature of the ‘coloured revolutions’ see [Taking the Risk Out of Civil Society: Harnessing Social movements and Regulating Revolutions](#)).

To many political commentators and media scholars, it was clear that the independent media in Serbia “facilitated the regime change and paved the way for democracy”. [10] Names of independent media broadcasters (particularly, *Radio B 92*) were even “[c]hanted as slogans during the numerous street protests” during the 1990s, becoming “symbols of resistance” for democracy. In this case, the Serbian independent media fulfilled an overtly political function and were highly involved in coordinating and organizing protests throughout the decade prior to the revolution (in 2000). These activities made the independent media particularly prone to pressure from government censors, especially after 1998 when Milosevic’s government cracked down on their efforts to undermine his authority. [11] However, Western countries had [significant interests](#) in toppling Milosevic’s regime, so they stepped in to support Serbia’s opposition groups and the independent media. Thus, [external financial](#) and diplomatic assistance from foreign countries, particularly from the United States, played a vital role in protecting and amplifying the voice of the independent media. Assistance for the creation of the Asocijacija Nezavisnih Elektronskih Medija (Association of Independent Electronic Media) which was formed in 1993, turned out to be crucial for the survival of the Serbian independent electronic media after 1998, as the international support it received helped protect many broadcasters from state repression. External funding for media development was [not insignificant](#) and during the early 1990s the international community provided between US\$7-10 million to the former Yugoslavia for this goal, while after 1995 the US gave a further US\$23 million and the European Union augmented this with another 17 million Euros.

As in Serbia, Georgia’s independent media played an important role in challenging legitimacy of their authoritarian government led by President Eduard Shevardnadze. Consequently, this meant that the independent media was often viewed by Shevardnadze as an enemy of the state. So in October 2001, Shevardnadze tried to “shut down Georgia’s most popular independent TV station *Rustavi 2*”. This prompted *Rustavi 2* and other media outlets to draw widespread public attention to the governments heavy handed attempt at censorship, which “led to three days of non-stop protest demonstrations” against the actions of the government. [12] These protests were so successful in mobilising popular support that they led to the resignation of several ministers, and enabled *Rustavi 2* to continue broadcasting without further state interference. This turned out to be a critical win for the opposition parties. This is because when Shevardnadze attempted to steal the elections in November 2003, *Rustavi 2* acted as a vital part of the opposition’s propaganda machinery, providing “almost non-stop” protest coverage and “inform[ing] Georgians about upcoming demonstrations and actions”. [13] These protests were part of the Rose Revolution, which led to the ousting of Shevardnadze, and the election (in January 2004) of the opposition’s leader, Mikhail Saakashvili. During the protests Saakashvili was aware of *Rustavi 2* significance and “[called on](#) [his] supporters to protect was *Rustavi-2*’s headquarters”.

As the [International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance](#) recognised: “[The development](#) of independent media is often considered to be the single greatest achievement of Georgia’s democratic transition.” Thus foreign assistance was arguably the key to the success of the independent media and of the Rose revolution, with opposition organisations receiving significant financial assistance from international democracy promoting bodies. In addition, Shevardnadze was [placed under](#) significant [diplomatic pressure](#) from the US government and the World Bank and International Monetary Fund to leave the opposition organisations alone. [14] It is interesting to note that the independent media that helped oust Shevardnadze, have now replaced their adversarial relationship with

the government with a symbiotic one: “For instance, before the new elections on March 28, 2004, major TV stations announced the shut down of all political talk-shows and debates” and the abolishment of public debate of the elections. [15]

The focal point for Ukraine’s Orange revolution was the December 2004 elections, in which authoritarian President Leonid Kuchma was accused of tampering with the electoral processes for his preferred candidate Viktor Yanukovich. Again the independent media played an important part in the success of the revolution. Indeed, prior to the revolution in July 2003, Andrii Shevchenko, the first president of the Independent Journalists Trade Union, argued that the “media is the thread which can be used to unravel the power of the establishment”. Coincidentally, around this time in mid-2003, two small media companies were able to secure a broadcast license for what was to be the opposition’s first TV station – *Channel 5*. Up until this point, Kuchma and his supporters had maintained control of “all the mainstream media outlets in the county”, which had enabled them to sustain an effective “information blockade” against the opposition leader Viktor Yushchenko. [16]

A top Ukrainian television critic, explained how this information blockade was also used to denigrate opposition-led protests following the contested parliamentary elections in September 2002: “Initially the large protests in Kiev were not reported at all on national television, then the number of protesters who turned up was dramatically under-reported, and later the situation was misrepresented by showing images of street people and drunks when reporting on the protests”. Kuchma’s government had always tolerated some degree of dissent within society, but just before the 2004 elections they clamped down on *Channel 5* by freezing their bank accounts and attempting to revoke their broadcasting license. However, *Channel 5* still remained on air, so their staff launched a hunger strike on 25 October 2004 that was broadcast until the government stopped harassing them on 2 November 2004. [17]

*Channel 5* went on to play an important mobilising role during the revolution, providing information on where protests were taking place: they even had a participatory presence at the opposition rallies themselves on large TV screens which broadcasted Yushchenko’s speeches and provided news and music to the protestors in the streets. The situation in previous elections had been very different, as in September 2002, the Kuchma’s government only allowed TV stations to broadcast once the regime was in “full control of all the news rooms”. While Marta Dyczok suggests that this difference might be partly explained by presences of the large international media contingent covering the 2004 elections, it also seems likely that other more direct external assistance may have had a hand in explaining Kuchma’s comparably tolerant attitude towards dissent. [18] This is because over the previous two years Ukrainian opposition groups had [received around](#) US\$65 million from US democracy promoting organisations.

Kyrgyzstan’s Tulip revolution – which resulted in the ousting of President Askar Akayev – occurred in March 2005, following the disputed parliamentary elections. US democracy promoters (amongst others) were again working behind the scenes, providing US\$26.5 million to various ‘independent’ groups between 2003 and 2004. [19] That said, it appears that the US was not always interested in ousting Akayev, as for most of the 15 years he was in power the US maintained [fairly positive](#) relations with Kyrgyzstan. Such congenial relations were disrupted by 2003, a change which may be [partly explained](#) by Akayev’s greater diplomatic engagement with Russia.



During his long reign in power, Akayev had not any qualms with closing down opposition newspapers that threatened his authority, so in May 2003 he forced an important opposition newspaper, *Moya Stolitsa*, out of business with a libel suit. Just one month later though, the indignant editor of *Moya Stolitsa* created a new opposition newspaper, called *Moya Stolitsa-Novosti* (*MSN*) which [obtained funding](#) from the US-based neoconservative organisation, [Freedom House](#). In November 2003, the US then also funded the creation of a new independent printing press, on which *MSN* and other opposition papers were produced. [20]

The Kyrgyz regime was demonstrably worried by *MSN*'s adversarial coverage and at one point they cut off the electricity supply to the newspaper's offices: however, "pressure from foreign governments" came quickly which subsequently "forced" the Kyrgyz administration to stop harassing the 'independent' media. In this case, as in the lead-up to the other revolutions, the foreign diplomatic and financial support for *MSN* (and the opposition media) was vital, as *MSN* has been credited as being "a major, transformative force", "fanning the fires of dissent" and printing the locations of opposition demonstrations, facilitating the Tulip revolution that drove Akayev out of the country. [21]

As the revolutionary examples in this section have demonstrated, the media has a powerful role in both generating and harnessing public sentiment around specific issues. It then seems logical to conclude that if the media can rig the rules of the media game to create winners, it can certainly select losers.

### **Undermining Social Movements and Democracy**

One of the first comprehensive studies on the communicative aspects of a protest (completed in 1970) investigated the press and television coverage of a mass demonstration held against the Vietnam War, in London (UK) on 27 October 1968. The demonstration in question involved approximately 60,000 protesters, most of whom marched peacefully through the streets of London (with an insignificant number of protestors involved in violent actions). Yet despite the overwhelmingly peaceful nature of the march, the media concentrated most of its coverage on the issue of violence – where even "[r]eporting of the peaceful main march suggested disorder and quasi-violence". [22] Since then, many researchers have followed up on this investigation, examining how the interplay between social movements and the media. A notable study is [Todd Gitlin's](#) (1980) *The Whole World Is Watching*, which illustrated how the mass media worked to undermine the objectives of both the [Students for a Democratic Society](#) and the anti-war movement. More recently, [Christopher Martin](#) has updated the longstanding thesis that has demonstrated the media's hostility towards the labour movement in his excellent book *Framed! Labor and the Corporate Media*.

One characteristic that strongly influences a social movement's media treatment are the degree to which they are perceived to be 'extreme' (that is, challenging the status quo) and 'militant' (in their tactics); whereby, the more extreme and militant a group, the more critical the media coverage. Critical coverage is also sometimes complemented by another delegitimising strategy, which involves downplaying the size of a protest. Prominent examples include: the British May Day protests in both 1973 and in 2001, the biggest ever [British anti-war march](#), [Washington DC's biggest ever protest](#), protests [opposing the bombing of Yugoslavia](#) in 1999, and protests opposing the North American Free Trade Agreement in Seattle. Research in the US has shown that protests or social movements that challenge the legitimacy of the governments foreign policies, are less likely to be covered by the mass media or more likely to be heavily "denigrated and delegitimized".

Laura Ashley and Beth Olson studied how women's movements were represented in the *New York Times*, *Time* and *Newsweek* from 1986 to 1996, and concluded that one of the "most astounding" results of their research was that the "women's movement was rarely covered". [23] This is important, because as James Hertog and Douglas McLeod's work demonstrated, depending on the version of protest coverage audiences watched, people showed big differences in opinion on the way they viewed both the issues raised and the protestors themselves. [24] Other research has shown how media coverage of protests can act to increase public hostility towards the protestors' cause. These findings have particularly important implications for social movements because, if a single report can determine how sympathetic the public is to their goals, consistently antagonistic media treatment is likely to have very negative repercussions regarding public support of protests themselves.

In 1998, [John McCarthy](#) and his colleagues compared the number and coverage of protests which took place in Washington DC in 1982 and 1991, and found that although there were 50% more protests in 1991, the number reported in the media (the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *ABC*, *CBS*, and *NBC*) decreased by 16% (from 158 to 133). [25] Critically, this reduction in protest coverage serves to increase competition between social movements to secure a piece of the valuable media pie. Rising financial pressure is then placed on smaller social movements unable to secure consistent positive media coverage, because donor organisations (especially corporate ones) may prefer to fund groups with better media profiles. Indeed, well-publicised media events – like the recent tsunami – can [encourage donors](#) to switch from funding smaller social movements towards larger more media-philic ones. Critically in order to gain a ticket to this exclusive media club, an unwritten price must be paid; because as William Gamson points out "the media may offer occasional models of collective action that make a difference, but they are highly selective ones". [26] Moreover as Todd Gitlin points out, for progressive reformist groups to maintain any semblance of positive media coverage, they have to partake in an ongoing fight to shape the daily news to prevent their messages being rendered unintelligible. [27] These processes encourage social movements to water down their political demands – to make themselves appear less challenging to the status quo – which in turn leaves them more vulnerable to cooption by political and economic elites. Problematically even when progressive activist groups obtain positive media coverage supportive of some of their objectives, their longer-term ambitions may still be undermined – on this point, see [Josh Greenberg](#) and [Graham Knight's](#) work for a discussion of the US anti-sweatshop movements relations with the media. [28]

## Discussion

The issues arising in this article amply demonstrate the wide variety in the quality and quantity of the media's coverage of protests: but how might these differences be explained, and what are their consequences for progressive social change? Answering these questions is particularly important, as it is fundamental to the maintenance of democratic institutions that citizens are able to participate actively in the administration of their society to determine their collective objectives. On this point it is important to reflect upon the neoliberal environment in which the media currently operates (within Western democracies at least). This is because neoliberal politics facilitates the rising power of (predominantly Western) [global media conglomerates](#) and serves to marginalise the majority of citizens from meaningful participation in media policy making. Consequently for any social movement to draw beneficial attention to its activities in the media the first barrier they

must overcome are the structural constraints of this communicative medium itself.

Despite the extremely negative picture painted in the previous section, there are still some winners in the 'media game'. So while losers, like the largest protest ever held in Washington, DC (the 2004 Women's March) received just a "handful of march-related stories over a few days" in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*; other protestors have their message amplified by the media, as the first two sections of this article illustrated. Stefaan Walgrave and Jan Manssens suggest that the specific contextual factors that encouraged the media to support the White March protests in Belgium included,

- (1) clear opposition between the public and elites;
- (2) a "highly emotional and symbolic issue that create[s] an atmosphere of consensus, emotion, and togetherness";
- (3) lack of a social movement – so that the media can appear objective and committed to the public good;
- (4) a simple issue;
- (5) a politically neutral, valence issue;
- (6) a media environment that is "commercial and characterized by depoliticisation and de-ideologisation";
- (7) turbulent times during which the reporting should take place (that is, not under normal circumstances); and lastly
- (8) a high degree of public trust in the media. Mobilising criteria like these are unlikely to be met by many social movements, and are even less likely to be fulfilled by any progressive movements. However, whatever the ultimate reason, the media's differential treatment of protestors is unlikely to be conducive to supporting the diversity and longevity of social movements required to support democratic forms of governance. This appears especially true when genuine grassroots social movements find themselves competing alongside manufactured (media friendly) corporate social movements or [astroturf groups](#), whose business driven interests are cleverly disguised from their participants and the public. All social movements and interest groups should be able to compete on equal grounds for media coverage, not just a select few that satisfy the media's news values – which usually act to "reinforce conventional opinions and established authority". [29]

Although the discussion so far may help explain why certain protests are 'backed' by the media, it does not explain why the independent media has often been able to play such a crucial role in ousting governments during revolutions. Interestingly, similar forms of independent media exist in Western democracies, but there they have little influence on the public sphere (see [www.projectcensored.org](http://www.projectcensored.org)) and are unlikely to facilitate a popular revolution in the near future. In fact, the independent media in the West, like their counterparts in authoritarian regimes, have often been targets of secret state-led '[wars](#)'. [30] During the 1960s and 1970s, in America:

"This offensive included a variety of repressive actions, including: the monitoring of personal finances of underground journalists; arrests and assaults on staff members; government-inspired distribution hurdles for radical periodicals; loss of printing facilities; grand-jury



subpoenas for editors and reporters; the release of 'disinformation' falsely attributed to underground media; publication of 'underground' papers secretly funded by the government; the bombing, burning, and ransacking of newspaper offices; and, possibly, the destruction of the transmitter of a listener-sponsored radio station." [31]

So how are the independent media in authoritarian states able to successfully challenge the status quo, when, in even democratic countries, governments have succeeded in repressing and marginalising their voices so effectively? Part of the answer to this question, seems to lie in the support foreign governments provide to the independent media (and social movements) in authoritarian states, financially and diplomatically, through both supportive and coercive mechanisms. The [National Endowment for Democracy](#) (NED) is important in this regard, as they are the main US-based democracy promoting organisation, and they act as a key coordinating body for many of the world's democracy promoting organisations.

Since the late 1980s, [Ellen Hume](#) – who herself sits on the advisory council for the NED's [Center on International Media Assistance](#) – estimates that international democracy promoting organisations have spent anywhere up to [US\\$1 billion](#) promoting independent media overseas. Many scholars have questioned the benign rhetoric surrounding the intentions of these 'democracy promoters', and they have illustrated that democracy promoting initiatives are usually strongly tied to the donor countries' geo-strategic priorities, or more generically to the interests of transnational capitalism. Thus, in 1991, the NED's president noted that "[\[a\] lot of](#) what [the NED] do today was done covertly 25 years ago by the CIA".

[William I. Robinson](#) suggests it is more appropriate to refer to the activities of the democracy manipulating community as promoting polyarchy (that is, [low-intensity democracy](#)) and explains that:

"The promotion of 'low-intensity democracy' is aimed not only at mitigating the social and political tensions produced by elite-based and undemocratic status quos, but also at suppressing popular and mass aspirations for more thoroughgoing democratisation of social life in the twenty-first century international order." [32]

The implications of such revelations are huge for the promotion of independent media organisations overseas (a phenomenon dealt with in full by Barker, In Press, The National Endowment for Democracy and the promotion of 'democratic' media systems worldwide). However, rather than just focusing on revolutions supported by foreign so-called 'democracy promoters' (read: democracy manipulators), it is enlightening to examine a case of an unsuccessful revolution in which the independent media played a supportive role for the would-be-revolutionaries.

In Azerbaijan, on 15 October 2003, the incumbent authoritarian President Heydar Aliyev was accused of stealing the election results when he handed over control of his regime to his son, Ilham Aliyev. Thousands of citizens immediately took to the streets to protest the results, but unlike the other successful colour revolutions in Eastern Europe, these protests were [violently broken up](#), with hundreds of protestors imprisoned and one killed. For the three weeks following the elections, Ilgar Khudiyev compared the media coverage of the protests between state and independent newspapers, and found that the independent media were supportive of the protestors. He also showed how the independent media, as in the colour revolutions, "cited the protestors more than official and authoritative sources" and quoted "those sources that strengthened the position of the protestors". [33] However,

although external democracy manipulating organisations provided financial support to the independent media in Azerbaijan, it seemed that without international diplomatic support (as well), the calls for a revolution fell on deaf ears. So the revolution failed, with the US government even [congratulating Ilham](#) on his election 'win'.

In part, the contradictory nature of the international democracy manipulating communities support for Azerbaijan's government may be explained by the favorable relations they maintain with the US and other transnational elites. A relationship that was further bolstered by their support for the 'War on Terrorism', and for American and British interests in the development of the [geostrategically important](#) Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline. So while democracy manipulating groups are happy to support and defend independent media organisations overseas (within limits) as a means of promoting social change, they will only fully support regime change when they are certain that they can ensure a smooth transition to polyarchal political arrangements that will serve the interests of imperial transnational elites more effectively than the incumbent government. So without apparent contradiction, while the US is openly supportive of Azerbaijan's authoritarian regime it also simultaneously supports the ousting of other less 'friendly' authoritarian governments in other countries (i.e. the colour revolutions).

Not surprisingly the selective nature of the US's 'democracy promoting' policies are echoed in the American media, which effectively serves to [manufacture public consent](#) for elite interests. So the US media provided strong support for the ousting of Milosevic while they 'ignored' other revolutions: [34] for example, in 2000 Greg Palast demonstrated how the *Washington Post* dismissed one of the biggest international stories of the year – the people's revolution in Bolivia (which rejected the US corporate-led privatisation of their water supply) – which it covered, or rather marginalised, in the Style section "[dangled from](#) the bottom of a cute little story on the lifestyle of some local anti-WTO protesters." It seems that in the minds of the democracy manipulators and the US media that the Bolivian citizens were supporting the wrong type of democracy, that is, popular democracy rather than polyarchy.

A similar affront on popular democracy occurred in Venezuela, in April 2002, when President Hugo Chávez (who was democratically elected in 1998) was temporarily removed from power in coup. In a manner reminiscent of the colour revolutions in Eastern Europe, there was clear support for the ouster of Chávez by transnational elites. In fact, the group which led the coup against Chávez received [financial support](#) from the NED, while the coup itself also received widespread support from the local independent media and from "some sections of the international media". [35]

Prior to the coup, the Venezuelan independent media – "[which includes](#) five out of the seven major TV networks and nine out of the 10 major daily papers" – had called for the ousting of Chávez, and made regular broadcasts encouraging people to participate in the coup. That is, they were working in direct opposition to the will of the majority of the Venezuelan public who had shown their overwhelming support for Chávez in numerous democratic elections. In the days following the coup, the radio, television and press then ignored the massive protests calling for the return of Chávez, casting a veil of invisibility over the protestors presence on the streets: this was clearly evident to Chávez's supporters, who subsequently focused their countercoup campaign on the primary supporters of the coup, the media institutions. [36] However, even when the media gave in to the protestors' demands for media coverage, they depicted the pro-Chávez campaigners as "the mob", in stark contrast to their coverage of the protestors who led the coup, who were framed as "civil society". So as this example illustrates, the presence of a vigorous independent media system, free from

government control or manipulation, does not necessarily facilitate democratic decision-making. Lastly, it is important to acknowledge that both internal and external efforts to undermine Chávez's government continue to this day, with the [strong support](#) of the US media and government.

## Conclusion

The Eastern European case studies provided in this article demonstrate how the development and selective support of independent media outlets may be used as one important part of an array of foreign policy tools that are used by neoliberal elites to promote polyarchy through the ouster of 'unfriendly' governments (be they authoritarian or democratic). In part this helps explain why progressive social movements challenging the status quo in Western democracies are so regularly denigrated, while those groups whose interests are more easily incorporated into, already aligned with, or of marginal importance to the policy frameworks of powerful political and economic elites are more readily supported by the media. This occurs because the media in the West are powerful corporate actors themselves and are staunch defenders of the status quo, and their interests are one and the same as those of transnational capitalism. [37] Consequently, it is readily apparent that Western media systems are not fulfilling their democratic role within Western societies, and are in fact acting instead in ways that work to undermine popularly understood conceptions of democracy. In the light of this information, social movement activists need to start seriously thinking about how they might improve the (often anti-democratic) mainstream media they are forced to operate within, as [Robert McChesney](#) notes:

“...regardless of what a progressive group's first issue of importance is, its second issue should be media and communication, because so long as the media are in corporate hands, the task of social change will be vastly more difficult, if not impossible, across the board.” [38]

In the US, media reform groups are already on the rise (see [www.freepress.org](http://www.freepress.org)), but in other countries the signs of change are less promising. So now is the time for social movements from across the board to work together in solidarity, to support independent, or what might be more accurately termed autonomous media, so they may begin to focus their efforts on the urgent task of global media reform.

Two particularly strong reasons stand out for why activists should address the issue of media democratisation right now, and they are

(1) a democratic media would let them get their unadulterated message out to the public “[enabling the](#) movement to have its own definition of the situation featured rather than marginalized”, and

(2) it is “[integral to](#) any radically democratic politics... because media corporations are part of the system that critical social movements are challenging”.

Each group may opt for different tactics, but together they need to collaborate on a common project that serves to democratise the mainstream media. In fact, media reform may be the one issue that can unite all progressive social movements in a “broadly resonant counter-hegemonic discourse” that may enable them to overcome their differences and allow them to begin to work together against the antidemocratic discourse of neoliberalism

for a progressive and equitable new world order.

*This article was presented as a peer-reviewed paper at the Asian Media Information and Communication Centre's conference titled: "Convergence, Citizen Journalism & Social Change: Building Capacity" (Brisbane, Australia, March 26-28, 2008). The referenced paper with all references can be [found here](#). Michael Barkers other articles can be [found here](#).*

## Endnotes

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