



Media Activism and the Academy, Three Cases: Media Democracy Day, Open Media, and NewsWatch Canada

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ABSTRACT In Canada, there is a relatively strong tradition of activist scholarship in media and communication studies. However, very little research has been undertaken on how working in the university may contextualize the ways in which academic workers participate in activist media projects. Focusing on three such projects – Media Democracy Day, Open Media, and NewsWatch Canada – this article draws upon elements of political economy and Bourdieu's field theory to consider how the different characters of the academic and activist fields work to enable and constrain the abilities of faculty to engage with them.

KEYWORDS media activism; academy and activism; academic work and media activism

While there is a strong tradition of activist scholarship in the field of media and communication studies in Canada, little has been written about the ways in which working within the university system enables and constrains participation in activist media projects. Drawing from elements of Bourdieu's field theory and critical political economy, this article examines the ways in which the different imperatives of academic institutions and activist organizations have worked to contextualize academic participation in three such projects: Media Democracy Day, OpenMedia, and NewsWatch Canada. This article draws from the direct experience of the authors with these

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projects. David Skinner was a co-founder of both Media Democracy Day (Vancouver) and OpenMedia, as well as a member of the OpenMedia Board of Directors until 2011. Robert Hackett was a co-founder of both Media Democracy Day (Vancouver) and OpenMedia, as well as co-director of NewsWatch Canada. And Stuart Poyntz has been one of the lead organizers of Media Democracy Day (Vancouver) since 2009.

Media Democracy Day is an annual public event that brings together academics, students, media activists, media professionals, and members of the general public to consider various issues around media reform. OpenMedia is a public interest advocacy group, focusing on the policy conditions that would sustain affordable and accessible internet and telecommunications services. And based on a research seminar held at Simon Fraser University (SFU), NewsWatch Canada is a news media monitoring project that undertakes content analyses of news coverage in the country and generates and publicizes lists of under-reported issues and stories.

All three projects are activist initiatives informed by concern that Canada's communication system fairly represents the interests of all social groups, and not be overwhelmed by the logic and power of capital and state (cf. Hackett & Carroll, 2006, pp. 14-15). The projects also straddle academic and activist fields of activity in that they: (a) share a concern to involve students and faculty in making a difference in the public domain; (b) engage relevant academic knowledge with the public domain and, reciprocally, enable activism to inform the development of scholarship; (c) strive to build positive relations with and between allied social movements; and (d) contribute to building a movement for media democratization.

Framing the Analysis

Attempting to draw some rigorous conclusions about the relationship between the academy and activism requires a theoretical framework for comparing the character of each type of activity, and the overlaps and points of engagement between them. Combining elements of Bourdieu's field theory with elements of political economy offers an entry point in this regard.

For Bourdieu, a social field is a "network, or configuration of objective relations between positions. These positions are objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents, or institutions..." (Bourdieu and Waquant, 1992, p. 97). From this perspective, social fields are variously comprised of institutions, organizations, social practices, values, and ideas. While complex and dynamic in nature, such fields position social actors in particular ways to the different elements operating within them, as well as to other actors and circumstances both within and outside of that field. Such fields are not deterministic in nature, but work to condition relationships, action, and outcomes. Employing concepts from critical political economy, these social

fields can be seen to both enable and constrain the actions of actors operating within them such that, on the one hand, they provide resources and opportunities for action not available to subjects outside the field while, on the other hand, a subject's particular position in one field may tend to limit their access to opportunities and resources in other fields (Mosco, 2009, p. 186; cf. Giddens, 1984).

Of course, both the academic and media activist fields are highly complex, having many different possible modes of overlap and differentiation between them (Napoli & Aslama, 2011). For instance, a tenured position at a university entails different knowledge and responsibilities than working in an activist organization (Borgman-Aboleda, 2011). At the same time, the ways in which tenured faculty might be positioned in relation to activist activities situated outside the university might be quite different compared to that of non-tenured or part-time faculty. Similarly, academic research, underpinned by a seemingly objective stance, can vary dramatically from activist research, which is often designed to further specific political ends (Borgman-Aboleda, 2011; Langlois & Dubois, 2005, p. 11). At the same time, given the varying composition of different institutions and organizations, the specific structure and character of any particular field is an empirical question.

Despite these variations, three broad dimensions of comparison between the academic and activist fields might be posited. These include:

(a) *Temporal dimension*: This point of comparison focuses on the temporal rhythms and imperatives that frame and underlie the academy and activism. For instance, the academic year is dominated by a teaching schedule and administrative tasks related to that schedule (Menzies & Newson, 2007). Activist events and campaigns have different temporal logics, often determined by the ebb and flow of political circumstances and organization-building imperatives. How the two meet can impact the abilities of academics to participate in activist activities and organizations, particularly for those with junior or part-time academic positions that leave little time to devote to other kinds of work.

(b) *Political dimension*: Here the fields can be seen as informed by particular sets of ideas, values, and professional codes (cf. Foucault, 1971). From this perspective, shared values and ideas might enable academics to work in the activist field or with activists to meet common goals and ambitions. At the same time, however, the professional codes and practices governing one field might make it difficult for different types of 'work' (e.g., research or activist organizing) to be valued professionally in another (Aslama & Napoli, 2011, pp. 334-335). Similarly, in this context, the ethics of striking alliances with particular interests or accepting money from particular sources may vary between fields.

(c) *Economic dimension*: At this level the focus is on resources and the ways in which they may or may not be shared between the different fields. Examples might include everything from office space, to labour power, to cash grants. For instance, student volunteers, internships, and experiential

learning might contribute to activist activities. At the same time, however, such activities may not be eligible for funding from academic granting agencies.

Distinctions between these three dimensions – the temporal, political, and economic – may not always be clearly drawn. For example, academic research used to further specific activist ends might be classified as either a political or economic resource for activist organizations. Similarly, academics serving on the boards of activist organizations or performing other tasks for those organizations that they can then credit to their own professional practice as ‘community service’ or ‘research’ might be seen as crossing these dimensions as well. However, these dimensions do provide a starting point for exploring how the different imperatives of the academic and activist social fields can both enable and constrain academic participation in the development, activities, and administration of our three case study projects.

The Cases

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, neoliberal public policies, combined with government inaction regarding concentration of media ownership in Canada, helped spur a range of media activism both on and off campus (Hackett & Carroll, 2006, pp. 164-169, 177-179; Skinner & Gasher, 2005, p. 67). All three of the projects examined in this article took form in this environment. While at one point or another they all entailed a high degree of academic participation, in their initial founding they were, however, quite different in their juxtapositions *vis-à-vis* the academic and activist fields: Media Democracy Day was founded largely outside of the academy and brought increasingly into the fold; OpenMedia began on more middle ground and, as it developed organizational capacity, moved to the activist field; and NewsWatch Canada was a creature of the academy from the outset.

Media Democracy Day

Media Democracy Day (MDD) is an event intended to bring together community activists, academics, independent media producers, researchers, and students, to promote networking and a sense of community around the project of media democracy. It has two specific goals: (a) democratization of the media – changing media practices and structures to make them more representative, diverse, and accountable; and (b) democratization through the media – using media to enhance popular political engagement and social justice issues (Hackett, 2014).

Catalyzed by the rapid expansion of right-wing press owner Conrad Black’s newspaper holdings in 1996, a “common front” of Canadian journalists, researchers, scholars, and advocacy groups formed the Campaign

for Press and Broadcasting Freedom (CPBF), modeled after the British group by the same name (Skinner & Gasher, 2005, p. 67). Led by an unemployed graduate of SFU's School of Communication Studies, people associated with the CPBF laid plans in 2001 to establish a centre in Vancouver to support alternative media, to research media policy, and to lobby municipal, provincial, and federal governments on media issues. In the face of unexpected disinterest in that plan from some local unions, at the suggestion of an SFU faculty member, the Vancouver activists decided instead to hold a local MDD – an idea that had been forwarded by Toronto supporters of the CPBF.

The initial organizing committee was comprised largely of alumni of SFU's School of Communication, an employee of the local Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, and an editor from the magazine *Adbusters*. The first Vancouver event attracted close to 350 people and comprised a public talk by well-known social activist and feminist Judy Rebick, a series of workshops about media production and media activism, and an exhibition of local independent media. Varying in scope and with shifting volunteer-based organizing teams, MDD has been held every October or November in Vancouver since 2001, with the 2014 event attracting 2,500-3,000 people. Often sponsored by communication students and departments, similar events have sporadically taken place across the country and beyond, riding waves of critical concern about media-related issues (cf. Media Democracy Days Ottawa, 2013; Media Co-op, 2012; Viva la Feminista, 2009).¹ Over the years, MDD has helped to sustain and build networks among allied alternative media and social justice groups. In Vancouver in particular, MDD has become a gateway project through which students and local community members learn about and stay abreast of current debates about media democratization and the organizations and initiatives that support media reform.

In MDD's first decade, local units of national organizations such as the Communication, Energy & Paperworkers Union (now part of Unifor) and the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives played important supporting roles. Other key sponsors have included OpenMedia.ca, the Vancouver Public Library (which supplies the main venue), and more recently, Vancity Credit Union. Throughout MDD's history, however, SFU's School of Communication has been key to animating the event, providing space, funding, and an essential point of co-ordination with the aid of alumni, students, and faculty who have taken lead roles in organizing and participating in the event. Vancouver's longstanding position as one of the most concentrated media markets in Canada has also helped spur public concern and involvement in the project.

¹ For instance, Toronto saw a number of MDD events in the early 2000's, with those in 2005 and 2006 in part animated by faculty and students from York and Ryerson universities.

While the academy has played a strong role in helping carry MDD forward, the relationship clearly has its limits. In Vancouver, for instance, even with part-time assistants financed by SFU and an expanded fundraising base, accessing adequate resources for MDD remains a challenge. More generally, as with so many other fields, academic practice has been impacted by new forms of managerialism that have intensified the role of scholastic surveillance, publishing infometrics, and labour precarity across university life (Brophy & Tucker-Abramson, 2012; Hall, 2007). Sustaining alliances between research and activist communities is thus challenging and has often been discouraged by measurements that weigh on faculty evaluation and career futures. As a consequence, recognition of the work done by faculty to build MDD into one of SFU's signature community engagement projects has not always been forthcoming, and allocating the time necessary to sustain partnerships and coordinate future programs has been difficult.

At a more granular level, as MDD Vancouver has expanded in recent years, the growth of the project has challenged the managerial skills of faculty whose time and expertise are otherwise focused on teaching and research. Moreover, the number of faculty members able and willing to oversee and supervise the project remains limited. One limited-term faculty member, whose work with MDD extended well beyond her academic duties, left the academy to find less precarious employment. Similarly, finding faculty willing to take on the project as a regular annual event outside of Vancouver has also been challenging.

While it is clear from the success of MDD Vancouver that the fields of activism and the academy can be woven together in ways that produce key resources and energies to enable media activism, the case also illustrates some of the challenges in this regard. Similar political perspectives and ambitions unite faculty, students, and members of the larger community in an activist cause and, both directly and indirectly, the university provides a wide range of resources that are essential to mounting a successful event. But mustering the resources to maintain an event that produces marginal returns in terms of faculty members' institutionally defined professional responsibilities has been difficult. Similarly, while holding the event in the middle of the Fall term helps ensure the availability of students to assist with and attend the event, the timing also places further strain on faculty who, in addition to their other regular duties, are preparing lectures and developing and grading mid-terms at that time of year.

OpenMedia.ca

OpenMedia was first incarnated as Canadians for Democratic Media (CDM) in the summer of 2007 in Vancouver by Steve Anderson, a graduate student at SFU's School of Communication (cf. Cross & Skinner, in press; Hackett, 2014). Building on concerns expressed at a conference organized by the

Department of Communication Studies at the University of Windsor to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the publication of Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky's book *Manufacturing Consent* (2010) some conference participants wanted to establish a network to engender more public participation in Canadian media policy development.² Working with a number of academics, unions, and activist organizations, small grants and donations were raised to provide a basic salary and expenses for Anderson, the nascent organization's first coordinator. In-kind donations supplied internet services, legal advice, media relations, and publicity, and several academics and activists worked with Anderson to craft a mandate and policy position for the young organization.

CDM's initial mandate was broadly drawn: "to create a common front among groups promoting reform of print, broadcast, and web-based media and to engage individuals and organizations traditionally absent from, and underrepresented in, media policy-making and media activism" (Canadians for Democratic Media, 2008, p. 2). The organization's first campaign – Stop the Big Media Takeover – focused on the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) Diversity of Voices hearing, a public consultation examining rising concentration of media ownership. CDM's website was the focal point for providing information and signing members to a mailing list, as well as a page where citizens could directly respond to the Commission's call for public comments. More than 2,000 people wrote in and a CDM delegation that included both activists and academics made the trip to Ottawa to appear at the hearing. Over the next two years, CDM was involved with a range of campaigns broadly focused on issues surrounding community media, journalism, and the internet.

Around the same time, big media companies in Canada were intensifying their vertical integration of content and carriage (Krashinsky, 2010; Ladurantaye, 2010). Control of the internet and related wireless markets was at the heart of these corporate plays, setting the stage for a series of struggles over the dimensions of public policy in this emerging field. CDM began to engage with the challenges this shift presented. Working with a number of partners, the organization helped organize a Net Neutrality rally on Parliament Hill in Ottawa in May 2008 (Nowak, 2008), and leading up to a CRTC hearing on the issue in July 2009, helped organize the SaveOurNet campaign, a coalition that brought together interested citizens, businesses, and activist groups. In the face of these actions, the CRTC adopted new traffic management guidelines, some resembling those put forward by SaveOurNet.ca (CRTC, 2009). Still, CDM's financial position remained precarious.

In 2010, CDM was rebranded as OpenMedia.ca (OM) to reflect the growing strength of parallel movements for 'openness.' Later that year, OM

² This summary of OpenMedia draws in part from Cross & Skinner (in press).

launched the Stop The Meter campaign (openmedia.ca/meter) to intervene in a CRTC decision to allow wholesale internet providers the power to impose 'usage-based billing' (pay-per-byte) on independent internet service providers, and thus on many Canadian internet users (CRTC, 2011). This campaign marked a major turning point for both the organization and on-line organizing in Canada. Deploying social media, and particularly Facebook, to accelerate the message, over the course of several months the campaign garnered more than 300,000 signatures to its on-line petition and flooded the CRTC offices with over 100,000 comments – an unprecedented level of public engagement with telecommunications policy. This pressure played a critical role in leading the CRTC to change what had been seen as a *fait accompli* decision favouring the large telecommunications companies to one seen as much more friendly to other stakeholders in the system. The success of the Stop The Meter campaign illustrated that issues concerning internet access and affordability strongly resonated with Canadians, particularly younger people, and ensuing campaigns generally centred on impending legislation or regulatory decisions directly related to the internet. Social media are particularly important in this work and, drawing from the mailing list generated by the Stop the Meter campaign, OM has been able to develop a steady stream of income (Open Media, 2011). In 2015, the organization lists more than 10 full- and part-time employees on its website.

One of the keys to OM's success has been framing complex issues in simple populist language that resonates with the everyday experience of young Canadians in particular. For instance, Stop the Meter represents a complex regulatory process dealing with the technicalities of internet traffic management, as putting a meter – like a parking meter – on individual internet accounts. Other campaigns have also found pithy ways to portray complex issues such as copyright (e.g., No Internet Lockdown) and trade disputes (e.g., Internet censorship) (cf. Open Media, n.d.). At the same time, campaign narratives employ a recognizable set of villains – like 'Big Media' or 'Big Telecom' – and preferred outcomes are framed in generalized populist terms such as the need for more choice, affordability, openness, transparency, or accountability. To promote political inclusivity, OM identifies itself as a 'post-partisan' organization, and carefully scrutinizes campaign framing and language to avoid alienating supporters who identify as coming from across the political spectrum (cf. Open Media, n.d.).

Over the course of OM's development, academic involvement with the organization has shifted considerably. Born out of an academic conference, faculty and graduate students helped establish contacts and relationships with people and organizations that supplied resources and expertise. They provided policy expertise, prepared regulatory submissions, and appeared at regulatory hearings on behalf of the organization. They also provided governance expertise, and several served on the Board of Directors. However, as OM developed both capacity and a constituency, it became increasingly difficult for academic advisors and board members to keep abreast of operations. The

rhythms and responsibilities of academic life – such as fixed teaching schedules and research and administrative responsibilities – were not conducive to the fast-paced and ever-shifting responsibilities associated with an activist enterprise, particularly one so closely engaged in constructing a large and diverse community of concerned citizens. In this context, misunderstandings over relationships and responsibilities began to arise between the organization and the board.

At another level, the organization's increasing focus on broad civic engagement, and the kind of messaging this entailed, bumped up against the nuanced language of academic analysis and discourse. Moreover, while there was never any question that donors might influence the organization's operations, some tension arose over accepting corporate donations. Further complicating the relationship was the geographic distance between OM's base in Vancouver and the fact that the academic board members lived in Ontario, which amplified the difficulties those members experienced with staying in touch with operations.

Consequently, while in the early stages of the organization's development, affinities between the academic and activist fields were critical to its successful establishment, as OM grew tensions developed across all three of the analytic dimensions outlined above – the temporal, political, and economic. Under these pressures, OM and its academic board members amicably agreed to part ways in 2011. Still, numerous ties between the academy and the organization remain. A survey of Canadian media activists co-authored by Anderson and Hackett, and funded by a program explicitly mandated to foster academic/activist collaboration, was a model serving both purposes: it generated an academic publication, as well as helped OM to develop its network, identity, and framing (Hackett and Anderson, 2010). Additionally, academic research continues to play an important role in developing and executing campaigns. Similarly, communication and media studies departments are important sites for recruiting employees and interns for OM, and student clubs at two major universities are an important component of the organization's public outreach.

NewsWatch

NewsWatch Canada (NWC) brings into play three fields: the academy, media advocacy, and journalism. Here, the relationship between the academic and activist communities has been mediated through both hegemonic and alternative forms of journalism.

Unlike MDD and OM, NWC was mainly a creature of the academy, although its original impetus derived from Bill Doskoch, a member of the board of the Canadian Association of Journalists who was concerned about the impact of growing media concentration and newsroom cutbacks on the quality and diversity of news that Canadians receive. Doskoch wrote to

several Canadian journalism and communication departments urging the creation of a Canadian version of Project Censored, an initiative founded in 1976 by Carl Jensen, a communication studies professor at Sonoma State University in California. Baffled by the mainstream media's lack of interest in the Watergate crimes prior to Richard Nixon's landslide re-election in 1972, Jensen devised a method of scouring the non-corporate alternative media for stories and topics that were under-reported in the corporate press as a way of publicizing the latter's democratic shortcomings (Jensen & Project Censored, 1997, pp. 13-14). He enlisted the help of a seminar class at Sonoma State to winnow the stories, which were then ranked by a national panel to produce a final 'top 25' list that was distributed nationally.

Along with early participation from the University of Windsor, the School of Communication at SFU accepted Doskoch's invitation. Originally called Project Censored Canada, NWC followed Jensen's procedure to produce a 'top 10' list of under-reported Canadian stories for the years 1994, 1995, and 1996. The project had several academic purposes. First, it aimed to contribute to media research by identifying 'blind spots' in the news agenda that would be relevant to assessing ideological biases or favouritism in news content. Second, the project helped communication students to concretize otherwise abstract critiques of 'mainstream' media through their own discovery of gaps and double standards in the news agenda; it raised awareness of the role of 'alternative' journalism in Canada's media ecology; and was used to teach research methods, including statistical and content analysis. The project succeeded in all these respects, yielding research publications and providing students with a range of media-related research experience.

On a more activist note, NWC and the research it generated were also intended to provide a political counterbalance to ongoing monthly media monitoring undertaken by the Fraser Institute, a Vancouver-based neoliberal policy think tank (Hackett, Gisldorf, & Savage, 1992). Back-channel anecdotal evidence acquired by NWC's founders indicated that the Fraser Institute's relentless critique of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) was rendering management anxious about charges that there was a 'left-liberal bias' in their news programming (Cooper, 1994). NWC's research promoted a different theme in public discourse – the influence of corporate power on Canada's news agenda. Moreover, NWC used this research to help conscientize social justice movements regarding the media field as a potential terrain for struggle and change.

The project fit well with the university's institutional routines. The bulk of the research was undertaken by a seminar of senior undergraduate students at SFU who acquired research skills, greater media literacy, and academic credit. Modest funding from the university's work/study program supported part-time research assistants to help prepare reports. Consequently, the project had some overlap across the academic and activist fields on all three analytic dimensions.

However, early in NWC's trajectory, the activist goal of directly confronting corporate control of the media was blunted in favour of adopting a well-established academic methodology and hypothesis-testing approach which, the co-directors decided, was more likely to attract research funding than a 'top ten' list. That assumption paid off and the project received a \$63,000 (CDN) grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) for 1994-97. That outcome, however, entailed a trade-off: more academic credibility and publications, but less media attention. This more conventional academic research, reflected in the change of the project's name to NewsWatch Canada, generated several articles in refereed scholarly journals (Uzelman, Hackett & Stewart, 2005; Hackett & Uzelman, 2003; Karlberg & Hackett, 1996), as well as a book titled *The Missing News*, which was published as a research report by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (Hackett & Gruneau, 2000).

The academic positioning of the project also limited its direct contacts with activist communities. NWC did receive occasional and modest, but highly useful, funding from organized labour, such as the union local representing media workers at Vancouver's two major daily papers. However, according to a senior NWC associate, insufficiently fulsome acknowledgement of one labour organization's funding apparently contributed to a lack of future support. One NWC report, critical of the major local daily, also revealed limits to the university's support for faculty engaging in social critique. Initially, the SFU media relations department circulated the NWC 'top 10' lists to its media contacts; an invaluable form of outreach. But following a shake-up in that department's personnel, which saw an influx of staff with corporate communications rather than journalism backgrounds, the unit declined to publicize the report. Although the reason for this decision was not made public, it was purportedly partly out of concern to maintain its relationship with the local press.

Firmly ensconced in the academy, as the project progressed NWC's relationship with activist interests continued to be indirect, mediated through parallel interests in obtaining more and better representation of social justice issues in the hegemonic news media. At the same time, NWC's success in directly influencing Canadian journalism has been modest at best. Journalists' longstanding skepticism of criticism that questions or challenges professional norms, like objectivity, plays a role in this regard, as evidenced by some journalists dismissing the project on the grounds that the concept of censorship should not be applied to what was, in their view, simply editorial judgment (Hackett & Carroll, 2006, pp. 137-139). However, partly through contacts with supportive journalists, NWC received a respectable, though intermittent, amount of press attention, and *The Missing News* report was deployed as intellectual ammunition by journalists and journalism educators arguing for more diversity and less ownership concentration in Canada's press (Hackett & Gruneau, 2000).

NWC probably had more impact with respect to its relationship with Canada's alternative media. The project often drew stories from independent periodicals like *This Magazine*, *Canadian Dimension*, and *Briarpatch*, as well as from urban weeklies with a counter-cultural pedigree, such as Vancouver's *Georgia Straight*. Although these publications also often reported NWC's 'top 10' list, suspicion of the project's purpose, territorial rivalries within the alternative media field, and arguably a culture of self-marginalization sometimes played a role in blunting the project's impact. For instance, some freelancers and alternative media disdained the project on grounds that it was a creature of the Canadian Association of Journalists and thus, in their view, the reactionary corporate media. On the whole, however, NWC introduced students and news consumers to perspectives and alternative media they would not otherwise have encountered.

Although pressure to exact traditional academic outputs, such as scholarly publications and credentialized students, influenced the form and direction of the project, NWC's base in a university was far more a resource than a constraint. After all, the project was dedicated to the disciplined production and dissemination of publicly relevant knowledge, ostensibly a primary *raison d'être* of academia. Once the SSHRC funding ended though, the project was dependent on the availability of professors to teach the seminar, and on small-scale grants for the analysis and dissemination of research. Consequently, it has only been taught sporadically since 2006 and while several cohorts have produced some excellent reports – including a revival of the top under-reported story list (NewsWatch Canada, 2011) – those reports have had little public circulation. Finally, it is of note that a significant factor in the project's fading profile is unrelated to either its academic or activist character and, instead, lies in the trend in Canadian communication scholarship and research funding away from the critical analysis of corporate news media, too glibly dismissed as yesterday's news in the era of Facebook and Twitter (Edge, 2014). The experience of NWC, however, indicates the potential for university-based projects to re-engage on this still-important front.

Media Activism and the Academy: Limits and Pressures

In each of the cases described in this article, the academy provided different forms and degrees of support to activist media projects. In Vancouver, Media Democracy Day had its origins in an opportunistic moment, as resources and momentum developed for a failed project were repurposed into something else. Since its inception, common media reform ambitions have motivated alumni, students, and faculty from SFU's School of Communication to participate in this activist project, bringing much needed economic resources with them. Although the circumstances that characterize the academic field continue to pose threats and challenges to academic participation, as

demonstrated by the sporadic mounting of the event in other jurisdictions, without ongoing support from SFU it is doubtful that the Vancouver event would have enjoyed the success it has.

Rising out of the academy, Open Media struggled to find a niche in the activist ecology and develop sustainable sources of funding. Academic support for the organization during its formative period was important and perhaps key to its survival. Yet, as the organization honed its mandate, and developed capacities and income to support that vision, new temporal and political imperatives at the organizational level clashed with those of the academic field. Although this led to a weakening of ties between the organization and the academy, given OM's continued growth and success, this case illustrates how the academic field was able to incubate and support the development of a new and innovative activist organization.

In the case of NewsWatch Canada, the project was wholly developed and sustained in an academic context, as academic resources were purposed to critically examine dominant media performance. Early on, some of the activist character of the project was blunted in favour of pursuing academic funding. How this might have affected the impact of the project in the larger public sphere is difficult to know. Despite these limitations, however, given the limited opportunities for funding a project of this nature in either the activist or journalistic fields, and the suspicion that journalists sometimes hold for academic research focused on their profession, it is doubtful whether resources to mount the project might have been mustered outside of the academy. In any event, NWC fit well with the pedagogical purposes and professional practices of the institution, and for a number of years it successfully straddled the academic and activist fields. However, in recent years, shifting pedagogical priorities have combined with diminishing resources to reduce the seminar's frequency and the project's future is in question.

In sum, these examples illustrate that despite limits and pressures, the academic environment can be used to support media activism. Such support is especially important in the case of progressive media activism for at least two reasons. First, unlike the United States where philanthropic foundations have been key in helping finance media activist organizations, there is very little of this kind of support in Canada (Skinner, 2012). Second, previous research suggests that media activists have a relatively low sense of collective identity, and a particularly strong 'free rider' problem. In other words, since the benefits of better media would accrue to *all* progressive movements, there is less incentive for *particular* groups to focus on media reform (Hackett & Carroll, 2006, pp. 186-189, 202). Given these realities, it is all the more important for media activists to find ways to lower the costs of mobilization. With their access to institutional resources, social justice-oriented academics can assist with that problem.

To be sure, there are forces militating against academic involvement in media activism. Shifting institutional imperatives, such as shrinking

departmental budgets, cuts to support staff, the growth of precarious labour, and the downloading of administrative responsibilities work against the abilities of faculty to engage in activism in general (Brophy & Tucker-Abramson, 2012; Menzies & Newson, 2007). The professional pressure on academics to accumulate research grants and peer-reviewed publications pushes in the same direction.

At the same time, some forms of activism might be tailored into two of the self-proclaimed mandates of the increasingly market-oriented university: 'experiential learning' (associated with the competitive pressure to attract students-as-customers, and to provide employment-related credentials), and 'community engagement' (a response to political pressure to demonstrate social relevance and public support). But these mandates fit better with some forms of activism (e.g., non-governmental organizations pursuing moderate reformist goals, projects with dedicated funding, and supervised internships) than others (e.g., grassroots, militant, or unwaged projects). Nonetheless, what is clear from these three cases is that the fields of activism and the academy can still be woven together in ways that produce key resources and energies to promote media reform. And this legacy is not insubstantial when so many other contemporary forces and interests pull in opposite directions.

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