Waves of Struggle: The History and Future of American Media Reform

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Abstract
Most Americans learn in school that an independent press is necessary for democratic self-governance, but rarely do we stop to reflect on what this means. How did we as a society determine media’s primary democratic role? How did we decide upon media institutions’ obligations to the public? In short, how was the relationship between the state, the public, and media constructed? And how has this relationship changed over time? Such inquiries require historical analyses, a retracing of policy trajectories, ideas, and discourses to moments before received assumptions about media’s normative role took on an air of inevitability.

This paper draws from archival materials to reflect on past struggles to change the American media system, with the aim to help inform future trajectories for media reform.

Disciplines
Communication | Communication Technology and New Media | Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration | Social and Behavioral Sciences | Social Influence and Political Communication

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Waves of Struggle

The History and Future of American Media Reform

VICTOR PICKARD, Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, United States

MEDIA REFORM STRATEGY

The 1940s was a contentious decade for US media policy. Activists, policy-makers, and media industries grappled over defining the normative foundations that governed major communication and regulatory institutions. At this time, a reform agenda took shape at both the grassroots social movement level and within elite policy circles. An analysis of the rise and fall of this postwar media reform movement holds at least three key lessons for contemporary media activists. First, it reminds us of the imperative to maintain a strong inside/outside strategy that keeps regulators connected to the grassroots. Second, we learn that media activists retreat on structural reform objectives at their own peril. Finally, we must remember that media reform rises and falls with other political struggles and radical social movements. With these lessons in mind, media reformers should seek to build liberal-left coalitions and, perhaps, a new popular front.

Most Americans learn in school that an independent press is necessary for democratic self-governance, but rarely do we stop to reflect on what this means. How did we as a society determine media's primary democratic role? How did we decide upon media institutions' obligations to the public? How was the relationship between the state, the polity, and media institutions constructed, and how has this arrangement changed over time? Such inquiries require historical analyses that retrace policy discourses and trajectories to
moments of conflict when normative foundations were fought over and assumptions about media’s democratic role crystallized. This approach highlights contingency; it reveals that outcomes were neither preordained nor natural. At key junctures in this media system’s development, amid multiple sites of struggle, certain claims won out over others. What quickly becomes clear is that the contours of our media system have resulted more from contestation than any consensual notion of what media should look like. Thus, a history of media is, in fact, a history of media reform. It is also a history of failed attempts to de-commercialize the media system.

Although perhaps best characterized as a continuous struggle, American media history is punctuated with moments of upheaval and reform when politicized groups saw media as a crucial terrain of contestation—often with the very structures of media themselves at issue. An overview of this history benefits from case studies in which conflicting interests and their respective discourses are cast into sharp relief. These moments tend to occur during what previous scholars termed “critical junctures” (McChesney 2007) or “constitutive moments” (Starr 2004) marked by crisis and opportunity. Drawing from archival materials to reflect on past struggles to change the American media system, this chapter focuses on one particular historical episode in the 1940s, a contentious decade for US media policy. As activists, policy-makers, and media industries grappled over defining the normative foundations that governed major communication and regulatory institutions, a reform agenda was taking shape at both the grassroots social movement level and inside elite policy circles. With the aim to help inform future media reform efforts, this chapter examines the tensions within this nascent media reform movement, many of which are still negotiated among media advocacy groups today. My analysis pays particular attention to the retreat from a structural critique of the commercial media system that was crystallizing in the immediate postwar years.

Historicizing media reform efforts and policy debates allows us to address the “how did we get here” question, which restores contingency and deferred alternatives—alternatives that merit recovery not only to correct the historical record by reclaiming resistance, but also to inspire future reform efforts. This kind of critical historical analysis problematizes and politicizes current media policies. An examination of any media system at any given time will most likely discover, to varying degrees, struggle against it. During constitutive moments or critical junctures—or whatever metaphor we choose—this resistance peaks, opening up fleeting windows of opportunity for reform. It is also during these moments of crisis when a media system’s normative foundations become concretized. Focusing on these episodes sheds light on larger paradigmatic shifts. It shows that despite tremendous activism against US media in the 1940s, by the end of the decade, the ideological consolidation that grided a commercial, self-regulated media system emerged largely intact and further inoculated against structural challenges. The rise and fall of this postwar media reform
movements were fought over and crystallized. This approach highlights the continuous struggle, American media of upheaval and reform when its relation to popular culture and social change. An overview of this history raising interests and their respective movements tend to occur during what McChesney (2007) or “constituent and opportunity. Drawing from to change the American media historical episode in the 1940s, a radical logic, policy-makers, and media moment, a reform agenda was taking shape and inside elite policy circles. In efforts, this chapter examines movement, many of which are ongoing today. My analysis pays particular attention to the actual debates allows us to address the logical contingency and deferred effort not only to correct the historical and future reform efforts. This and politicizes current media analysis at any given time will most likely is not a simple thing. During constitutive moments one can choose this resistance peaks, even reform. It is also during these constitutive moments that the incentive foundations become conditional, they operate on larger paradigmatic shifts. US media reformers in the 1940s, by way of an argument that girded a commercial, nonprofit and further inoculated of this postwar media reform movement holds at least several key lessons for contemporary media activists. Before explicating these implications, I first discuss a historical and theoretical framework that brings these struggles into focus. Next, I examine some specific reform initiatives with an eye on how they paralleled our current political moment. I conclude with some general lessons that can be drawn from this failed media reform movement.

A GRAMSCIAN APPROACH TO POWER AND HISTORY

Like all social phenomena, media policy does not spring fully formed from Zeus’s head but rather emerges from a multiplicity of sociopolitical influences. In making sense of these messy processes, a historical analysis of media policy invites a particular theoretical model, one that underscores contingencies without obscuring the evolving contours of power relationships. At its best, this kind of theoretical approach encourages and guides action by underscoring what is at stake and by bringing into focus political arrangements and power relationships. In general, historicizing is valuable for allowing us to see present relationships, practices, and institutions as historical constructs contingent upon contemporaneous factors instead of simply natural phenomena. Histori- zing current media debates allows us to reimage the present and reclaim alternative trajectories.

The rubric of historical research encompasses a number of theoretical approaches. While high theory is unnecessary for understanding the history of American media reform, a particular framework may prove to be useful if we are to understand recurring patterns of struggle. Combining intellectual, social, and political histories, my theoretical approach to understanding how power operates and history unfolds vis-à-vis media processes and institutions can best be described as Gramscian. Emphasizing contingencies, contradictions, and ruptures, this analysis assumes that, rather than being independent and linear, historical processes transpire in complex dialectical interplays that are mutually constitutive. Rendered correctly, such a Marxist historical approach avoids over-determination. The critical media studies scholar Deepa Kumar (2006, 83) argues that “far from being reductionist, the Marxist method enables us to understand the world in all its complexity and opens up the possibility for change.” Despite its concern with showing how power triumphs, this framework does not presuppose that policy outcomes always reflect the most powerful interests’ intentions, but rather strives to encourage engagement and resistance.

Much Gramscian theory centers on the notion of hegemony, a contentious political process by which assumptions that serve elite interests becomes commonsensical (see Gramsci 1971, 323–334, 419–425). Seeing the formation of common sense as a crucial terrain for constant political struggle, this framework
focuses on how hegemonic forces operate via a complex interplay between dominant interests and those they attempt to subjugate. These power relationships are messy and inherently unstable and must be recreated daily, constantly opening up new areas for resistance. Stuart Hall (1988, 7) observed that hegemony "should never be mistaken for a finished project." A Gramscian historical framework restores the promise of agency, recovers contingency, allows for unexpected outcomes, and assumes human events reflect not just societal consensus but also ongoing conflict. This conflict is greatest during realignments of what Gramsci termed "historic blocs" of the ruling elite. Such reconstructions produce new political opportunities, which in turn allow for new policy formations.

Gramsci referred to these periods in which historic blocs are challenged as "conjunctural moments." A conjuncture marks the immediate terrain of conflict. Explicating this useful concept, Gramsci (1971, 178) wrote:

A crisis occurs, sometimes lasting for decades. This exceptional duration means that incurable structural contradictions have revealed themselves . . . and that, despite this, the political forces which are struggling to conserve and defend the existing structure itself are making every effort to cure them, within certain limits, and to overcome them. These incessant and persistent efforts . . . form the terrain of the "conjunctural," and it is upon this terrain that the forces of opposition organize.

Conjunctural moments have taken place at different points in American history when industry control of major media institutions was challenged. For example, during the Depression and the New Deal, a counter-hegemonic regime was struggling to take hold. With historic blocs in flux, new alliances emerged to form what Gramsci (1971, 210, 275) termed a "crisis of the ruling class's hegemony" and a "crisis of authority." "If the ruling class has lost its consensus," Gramsci argued, "this means precisely that the great masses have become detached from their traditional ideologies" (ibid., 275–276). According to this Gramscian analysis, "the crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born."

That these counter-hegemonic attempts ultimately failed makes them no less significant, especially since even in failure they often have lasting material effects. The cultural historian Michael Denning (1996) makes a similar argument in his examination of the Popular Front, a coalition of left-wing radicals, New Deal liberals, and political progressives that drove reform during the 1930s and 1940s. Denning notes how during the Great Depression and World War II a prolonged "war of position" unfolded between conservative forces and a Popular Front social movement that attempted to "create a new historical bloc; a new balance of forces." Denning argues that the "post-war settlement" that eventually emerged—exemplified by the corporatist arrangement of big labor, big capital, and big government—resulted from "the defeat of the Popular
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ultimately failed makes them no less they often have lasting material 1996) makes a similar argu- a coalition of left-wing radicals, a drove reform during the 1930s that Depression and World War II been conservative forces and a “to create a new historical bloc, the “post-war settlement” that conflictist arrangement of big labor, an “the defeat of the Popular

Front and the post-war purge of the left from the CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations] and the cultural apparatus.” He observes, “If the metaphor of the front suggests a place wherecontending forces meet, the complementary metaphor of the conjuncture suggests the time of the battle.” Based on this view, Denning sees the history of the Popular Front as “a series of offensives and retreats on the ‘terrain of the conjunctural’” (ibid., 22).

This focus on evolving historical patterns of power struggles and shifting institutional life cycles around conjunctural moments brings Gramscian analysis into conversation with concepts associated with historical institutionalism. At first glance, Gramscian theory and historical institutionalism may seem like an odd pairing. After all, the latter seeks to move beyond grand theorizing and basic material explanations for institutional change that do not adequately explain all variations of institutional behavior (Skocpol, Evans, and Rueschemeyer 1985). However, historical institutionalism assumes that larger macro-level historical and political relationships—the focus of much Marxist analysis—are mediated through interconnected institutional discourses, habits, and imperatives to impact micro-level processes. Both Gramscian theory and historical institutionalism focus on how struggles over foundational assumptions during times of crisis can result in intellectual paradigm shifts. Furthermore, in seeking to shed light on sharp breaks from the past, combining these theoretical models can help account for how moments of equilibrium are ruptured, ushering in a new set of policies that may result in new institutional arrangements. Both theoretical approaches also assume that institutions and their relationships reflect historical experiences of conflict and compromise among organized constituencies. Historical institutionalism tries to make sense of how some trajectories are chosen over others (Skocpol 1985). Thus, discerning “paths not taken” is as significant as identifying the chosen trajectories and resulting path dependencies (Pierson and Skocpol 2002).

The most important overlap in the two frameworks is between Gramsci’s notions of crisis and conjuncture and historical institutionalism’s focus on “critical junctures.” The concept of critical junctures brings into focus how institutional regimes and relationships see long periods of relative stability and path dependency punctuated by sudden ruptures in which the system is jolted and new opportunities for change arise. Much literature within policy studies shows how decisions made during such periods profoundly impact systemic development (see, for example, Collier and Collier 1991; Kingdon 2001; Stone 2001). Kathleen Thelen (1999, 385) notes that although politics always involves some degree of happenstance like agency or choice, once a path is established, it can become “locked in” because “all the relevant actors adjust their strategies to accommodate the prevailing pattern.” Applying this theory to understanding media reform, Robert McChesney (2007, 9–12) sees increasing evidence that the US media system is undergoing a critical juncture in the early twenty-first century.

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Critical junctures tend to invite more public engagement with and scrutiny of media systems than less contentious periods and typically emerge during times of technical, political, and social change. This theoretical and historical framework brings into focus recurring moments of contestation when a media system’s normative foundations are challenged and, possibly, redefined.

WAVES OF MEDIA REFORM

Periods of media reform are often marked by an explosion of activist media. Reform-oriented media have been a crucial resource for American social movements and marginalized groups, who have often resorted to contesting representations in the mainstream press or creating their own media to advance activist causes. Revolutionary pamphleteers helped to mobilize the struggle for independence against the British. A vibrant abolitionist press galvanized reformers for decades preceding the Civil War. A popular working-class press was integral to the burgeoning labor movement in the first half of the twentieth century. In the early 1900s, the advertising-supported socialist newspaper *The Appeal to Reason* reached nearly a million subscribers and helped advance the socialist candidate Eugene Debs’s presidential ambitions. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, an ethnic press provided support for various marginalized cultural groups (Gonzalez and Torres 2011). In the 1960s, an underground press helped sustain the civil rights movement and other activist groups. Today, digital social media are central to a myriad of activist efforts.

In the twentieth century, media reform struggles also increasingly centered on questions of policy to effect change in the structures of media themselves. The 1930s and 1940s witnessed widespread reform efforts, particularly toward broadcasting and newspapers, when both elite and grassroots activists considered a relatively wide range of policy options. In the 1930s, a spirited media reform coalition attempted to establish a more public-oriented broadcast system, while the Newspaper Guild challenged commercial publishers’ control over print media production (Scott 2006). These efforts were ultimately crushed, but they established benchmarks for future reformers to carry on various struggles, particularly during the 1940s, which I expound on shortly. During the 1960s, media reform projects were carried forward by the civil rights, antiwar, and other social movements (Lloyd 2007). These years witnessed notable media reform victories: public broadcasting was established, the Fairness Doctrine enjoyed its golden age, and civil rights activists won the historic WLBT case in which a racist broadcaster was denied a license renewal (Horwitz 1997). Also at this time, advocacy groups began coordinating around a number of key policy issues (Mueller, Kuerbis, and Page 2004). In the 1970s, during what were called the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) debates, a global media reform movement, perhaps the first of its kind, took place around communication rights (Pick-

More recently, issues like media ownership and Internet policy—as well as ongoing struggles over representation and alternative media—have galvanized vibrant reform movements. Media democracy, media justice, and media reform movements coalesced in the late 1990s to take on excesses in the corporate media system. These movements often took advantage of new digital media, especially the Internet. The latter would help drive a radical indymedia movement that established independent media centers in communities across the globe (Pickard 2006). These activist efforts also helped establish the influential media reform organization Free Press, which would successfully engage and organize broad constituencies around what had previously been seen as obscure media policy issues. For example, in 2002, nearly three million people wrote letters to the FCC contesting proposed plans for loosening ownership restrictions (Klineberg 2007, 238–244). In 2006, over one million people petitioned Congress to protect a then obscure policy called net neutrality to maintain a nondiscriminatory Internet (Kirchgaessner, Waldmeir, and Waters 2006). In 2012, four and a half million people signed a petition to roll back two proposed Internet piracy bills that would have given government and corporations tremendous power over web content (Washington Post 2012).

These activist energies are often put on full display during a series of large national media reform conferences that have attracted several thousand attendees. As reformist interventions against media institutions become increasingly common, it might be tempting to assume that these instances are unique in American history. However, as this brief historical sketch suggests, these waves of struggle are, in fact, continuities of ongoing media reform traditions. For its parallels and important antecedents to today’s policy challenges, one moment of media reform—a largely forgotten episode within dominant historical narratives—holds particular contemporary relevance.

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE POSTWAR MEDIA REFORM MOVEMENT

Building on earlier progressive and New Deal criticism, the 1940s saw public discontent toward media institutions rise once again. Commercial radio came under vehement public condemnation, and the newspaper industry underwent a crisis that drew calls from policy-makers for structural reform (for newspapers, see Davies 2006; for radio, see Jones-Wolf 2006). The disintegration of the liberal New Deal consensus and a rightward shift in the political landscape led to sociopolitical turmoil and uncertainty. Technological change was afoot with the rise of FM radio and television just over the horizon. These factors combined to produce a fleeting opportunity for a fairly radical overhaul of an entrenched
media system—reforms that would have been unthinkable during less contentious times.

At this time, policy elites and social movement groups fought over a number of crucial media debates that helped define the relationships between media institutions, various publics, and the state. These included the FCC forcing NBC to divest itself of one of its two major networks; the Supreme Court’s 1945 antitrust ruling against the Associated Press, which called for government to encourage “diverse and antagonistic voices” in media; the 1946 FCC Blue Book, which outlined broadcasters’ public service responsibilities; the 1947 Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press, which established journalistic ethics; and the 1949 Fairness Doctrine, which mandated public interest parameters for broadcasters. The logic driving these reform efforts can best be described as “social democratic,” in the sense that it assumed a progressive role for the state in protecting media’s public service responsibilities from excessive commercialism (Pickard 2011b).

By the mid-1940s, these media reform efforts were further bolstered by increasing dissent from below, manifesting in a media reform coalition composed of disident intellectuals, civil libertarians, African American groups, religious organizations, educators, labor unions, and other progressive activists (Pickard 2011) who pressured broadcasters via petitions, call-ins, and letter-writing campaigns to radio stations and the FCC, urging them to democratize the public airwaves and to improve programming. Within these debates, significant challenges arose to confront the reigning libertarian notion of media industry self-regulation.

A signature model of 1940s radio activism was the neighborhood listener council. Created by local communities—often by parents, educators, and minority groups—listener councils lobbied radio stations and the FCC to privilege localism and curb excessive commercialism. By the mid-1940s, listener councils were established in Cleveland, Columbus, and New York City, and in more rural areas like central Wisconsin and northern California. As these councils emerged across the country, reformers advocated for their broader deployment to counteract against commercial broadcasters’ political and economic dominance. Some reformers hoped that the councils could extend to the state level and coordinate nationally, thereby harmonizing their standards and survey techniques with the FCC and perhaps via an overarching public national council. Reformers proposed that councils receive local government support or be volunteer-based to provide institutional support for community groups to conduct research on the state of broadcasting. Armed with hard data, listener councils could pressure radio stations with the threat of their representatives presenting critical evaluations to the FCC during broadcasters’ renewal procedures (White 1947, 122–123, 222–234). Listener councils’ potential generated much enthusiasm, even if they never became a major force within policy debates. The veteran media reformer and NYU communication
Professor Charles Siepmann (1946, 51–52), for example, saw listener councils as the “community’s best safeguard against the exploitation of the people’s wavelengths and the surest guarantee [that radio stations consider] ... its needs.” By devising blueprints for high-quality local programming, Siepmann opined, the councils served as “watchdogs for the listener, ready and able to protest the abuse of airtime and to promote its better use.”

Many activist groups participating in the 1940s media reform coalition also created their own alternative media, contested negative imagery, and exploited opportunities within commercial media to disseminate their political messages. Labor unions succeeded in buying a number of stations and instructed their members on how to produce their own shows or insert labor-friendly scripts into commercial radio programming. The Congress of Industrial Organizations galvanized reformers with its Radio Handbook (1944), a pamphlet that contained instructions for getting on the air and promoting “freedom of the air.” It insisted that workers had not exercised “their right to use radio broadcasting.” “Labor has a voice,” the pamphlet stated, “and the people have a right to hear it.” Although broadcasters owned radio stations’ equipment, “the air over which the broadcasts are made does not belong to companies or corporations. The air belongs to the people” (CIO 1944, 6). The handbook instructed activists on how to gain radio time for a labor perspective via different techniques and formats, including the Straight Talk, the Round Table Discussion, the Spot Announcement, and the Dramatic Radio Play. It encouraged activists to generate good publicity and to coordinate with consumer groups, cooperatives, women’s organizations, and religious organizations (ibid., 24). In addition to labor-related concerns, the groups comprising this media reform coalition shared major grievances, critiques, tactics, and strategies for engaging in media policy debates in Washington, DC. Media reformers continuously pressured the FCC and commercial broadcasters to include diverse perspectives in radio programming. Their objectives often would converge around specific policy interventions, especially with progressive allies at the FCC.

This media reform alliance of grassroots activists and progressive policymakers led to some of the most aggressive public interest interventions in American media history. As mentioned above, in the early 1940s the FCC broke up NBC—an action that is unthinkable today. In the mid-1940s the FCC attempted to establish meaningful public service requirements on broadcasters as a requirement for license renewal. But as the decade progressed, structural criticism and reform efforts petered out and policy activism both in- and outside Washington DC underwent a period of decline. To summarize a much longer story, the postwar media reform movement ultimately failed, both by its own shortcomings and by external pressures and other political events beyond its control. In particular, it was suppressed by a corporate backlash that used Cold War politics to effectively red-bait and silence reformers. Radicals were
purged from social movement groups and New Deal progressives were chased out of the nation's capital. Once this reform movement was demobilized, its initiatives were variously ignored, contested and co-opted by industry-friendly arrangements. I call this the "postwar settlement for American media," which kept in place a self-regulating, commercial media system based on a "corporate libertarian" arrangement that continues to shape much of the media Americans interact with today (Pickard 2015a). The media reformers would, however, succeed in advancing some progressive policies, including what would become the Fairness Doctrine, and their discursive gains would help set the stage for future victories like the creation of a public broadcasting system in the late 1960s.

LESSONS FROM THE 1940s MEDIA REFORM MOVEMENT

The rise and fall of the 1940s media reform movement is relevant today for a number of reasons. The recent collapse of commercial journalism makes the 1940s reformers' inability to effect structural change and the passed-over alternatives especially timely for reexamination. The persistence of similar crises suggests that many of our media problems are structural in nature and therefore require structural alternatives. Specifically, given the failure of the market to provide viable journalism, structural alternatives like nonprofit or worker-owned newspapers, as well as more proactive regulatory interventions and resources devoted to public media, are worthy of reconsideration (Pickard 2011a). Another parallel is that similar issues complicating new media then are reoccurring today, like questions of gatekeeping (e.g., net neutrality), corporate capture of policy discourse and regulatory agencies (as well as new forms of red-baiting), and questions of spectrum allocation and management (Meinrath and Pickard 2008; Pickard and Meinrath 2009). As the FCC and other regulatory agencies take up questions regarding the future of journalism and broadband provision, they would do well to remember that the lack of clear public interest standards can be traced back to earlier policy battles. And finally, just as a media reform movement was coalescing then, a vibrant one is emerging now, albeit in fits and starts. History can help guide this new movement away from past mistakes.

Indeed, the purpose of this research is not to mourn a lost golden age or to lament what could have been. Rather, it aims to draw linkages between previous struggles and alternative futures, to learn lessons from past failures, and to see contemporary media reform movements as part of a long historical tradition. This kind of research reminds us that our media system could have developed differently. If policy initiatives like the Blue Book had been given fair consideration, we would likely have a different media system today, one based more on public service and less on commercialism. But beyond denaturalizing

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New Deal progressives were chased from the movement was demobilized, its and co-opted by industry-friendly movement for American media," which media system based on a "corporate stage much of the media Americans era reformers would, however, succeed in including what would become the would help set the stage for future existing system in the late 1960s.

RENEWED MOVEMENT

The movement is relevant today for a commercial journalism makes the change and the passed-over alternative. The persistence of similar crises are structural in nature and thereby, given the failure of the market alternatives like nonprofit or worker-friendly regulatory interventions and worthy of reconsideration (Pickard complicating new media then are being (e.g., net neutrality), corporate agencies (as well as new forms of location and management (Meinich 2009). As the FCC and other the future of journalism and remember that the lack of clear earlier policy battles. And finally, thing then, a vibrant one is emerging to help guide this new movement to mourn a lost golden age or to draw linkages between previous lessons from past failures, and to as part of a long historical tradition, a media system could have developed. Blue Book had been given fair media system today, one based realism. But beyond denaturalizing the status quo, there are at least three key lessons for today’s media reformers that can be gleaned from the decline of the 1940s media reform movement.

The first lesson is fairly intuitive for contemporary reformers: this history reminds us that it is imperative to maintain a strong inside/outside strategy that keeps regulators connected to the grassroots (and not only to corporate lobbyists). Had progressive policy-makers in the 1940s coordinated more with community activists, they may have been able to better withstand the ensuing onslaught. In more recent times, this vulnerability arguably recurred in the United States around net neutrality and other Internet policy issues that ultimately focused too much on a Washington, DC, strategy and failed to connect—despite noble efforts and notable exceptions—with less technocratic circles. Moreover, when liberal regulators come under pressure from industry—as they inevitably will—they will require popular support, which is difficult to maintain when compromises are being hatched behind closed doors, often in the public’s name but without public consent.

Second, we learn that media activists retreat on structural reform objectives at their own peril. Postwar media reformers faced many difficulties beyond their control, but their decline also came about in part due to their failure to maintain a structural critique of the commercial media system. In the early 1940s, reformers were attempting to break up media conglomerates, but by the end of that decade they were trying to shame media corporations into being good. A structural approach recognizes that, short of public ownership, the most effective safeguard against an undemocratic commercial media system is a combination of aggressive government regulation at the federal level and local control and oversight at the community level. In light of the current struggle to prevent an overly commercial and concentrated media system from becoming even more so, it is instructive to recall a time when the FCC fought to bolster public interest safeguards instead of throwing them out. For a reinvigorated media reform movement to rise up, however, also requires an intellectual project that maintains a clear structural critique, one that penetrates to the root of the problem with a commercial media system. This structural critique could potentially unite diverse constituencies and lead to not just reform, but transformation of the media system.

Third, we are reminded that media reform rises and falls with other political struggles and social movements. Most activists are well aware that coalition-building between diverse social movements is paramount. For example, we must convince activists associated with voting rights, the movement against the carceral state, anti-death penalty campaigns, the environmentalist movement, immigrants’ rights, and so on that media reform should be a central piece of their platforms. However, we also have to seek out ideologically diverse coalitions. This does not just mean linking up arms with social conservatives and libertarians to create strange bedfellow coalitions—as has happened in the
recent past—around issues like excessive commercialism, media concentration, indecency, and privacy; it also means liberals should be finding common cause with more radical social movements. An open letter to the left-leaning Nation magazine reminded liberal reformers that they needed radicals to advance their issues, that history shows how radicals often provided punch and coherence to liberal reform agendas (Sunkara 2013). Radicals tend not to make the strategic error of retreating from structural critique and activism, nor do they lose sight of the longer struggle and the over-arching normative vision.

CONCLUSION

To summarize, what American media policy advocates should consider aiming for is a new popular front, one that unites inside-the-beltway liberals with more radical grassroots activists and intellectuals. While the DC policy liberals understand the political process and can remain focused on steering reform initiatives through legislative and regulatory channels, radicals can maintain a “big picture” structural critique, remind liberals what is at stake, and keep their eyes on the long-term vision. Bold ideas for new media policies typically exist at the margins of political discourse. It is incumbent upon activists and intellectuals—including radical scholars—to bring those alternatives to light, to challenge dominant ideologies and relationships, and to assist reform movements working toward a more just and democratic media system.

NOTES

1. Much of this chapter is adapted from Pickard (2015b).
2. For more details on the postwar media reform movement, see my discussion in Pickard (2012, 2013).
3. Other groups involved in 1940s media reform campaigns include the ACLU, Jewish organizations, and women’s groups. For an interesting case study of the latter that was often pro-industry and anti-media regulation, see Proflitt (2010).

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commercialism, media concentration, and globalization. As mechanisms of corporate control over the people, they should be finding common cause. vocalization is not the only weapon of the citizenry. It should be an act of remembering the past, as well as an act of collective action to shape the future."

"Ivocates should consider aiming not only at the picks, but also at the ears of the people. While the DC policy liberals tend to focus on steering reform from within, radicals can maintain a criticism of the system while also providing punch and coherence to their arguments. They do not lose sight of maintaining a transformative vision."

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