The Dialectic of Resistance and Restriction

Dissident Citizenship and the Global Media

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The relationship between mass media and dissident social movements is complex and ever-changing. Despite the recent rise of "new media" like web logs, YouTube, and the Internet more generally, the traditional media still exert a great deal of power. This article considers the ways the mass media use this power to suppress dissent and whether this suppression is intentional or an inadvertent byproduct of the norms of professional journalism. While scholars researching the suppression of dissent tend to focus on how the state squelches dissent, the mass media also play an important role in hampering social movements around the globe. This article offers a typology of mass media-related suppression, from more direct forms, like outright censorship, to indirect methods such as mass media deprecation—the negative portrayal of dissidents and their movements for social change. Several international examples bolster this typology, illuminating how these methods of suppression play out in the real world.

Dissent and the Media. Dissent is contentious, adversarial, non-conformist political thought and activity that challenges the status quo and transgresses norms of public interaction and deliberation. As such, it is the collective mechanism...
for initiating social change. Dissident citizens and social movements publicly contest prevailing structures of power or the underlying logic of public policy, simultaneously positing views that consistently fail to breach the dominant political discourse. They engage in an array of oppositional tactics both inside and outside the institutional pathways of political power. As Cass Sunstein, a law professor at the University of Chicago notes, dissent is a "rejection of the views that most people hold." But dissent also entails action, pressing beyond mere disagreement. Dissident citizens who take action to change their socio-political environment both disagree with and actively oppose official, dominant, or hegemonic doctrines. By explicitly demonstrating their political difference with received ideas, dissidents attempt to widen the path of freedom and enhance the vibrancy of civil society.

To meet these ambitious goals, media coverage—preferably in a favorable light—is a crucial precondition. Media play a central role in the development and demobilization of social movements. Social movement scholar Doug McAdam argues that media coverage is a key "strategic hurdle" that must be overcome if dissidents want to stimulate social change. As political geographer Clive Barnett notes, "Access to media coverage is in principle a crucial means of bringing pressure to bear on powerful actors, obliging them to act in accord with publicly accepted norms rather than from narrow private interests."

Sometimes dissident citizens successfully make use of the mass media to disseminate and amplify their messages. For example, a study of the women's movement in the United States from the 1950s through the 1990s found that media coverage that adopted the lens of equal political rights for all had a positive influence on the public's attitudes towards gender. Additionally, abortion rights movements in Germany and the United States have succeeded at getting the media to spread their ideas. Sociologist Myra Max Ferree suggests that "strategically chosen American and German feminist discourses have successfully entered the mainstream of media discourse in each country." In both studies, the media portrayed the social movements in ways that resonated with public opinion, aiding activists' socio-political agendas. Similarly, the anti-apartheid movement used a combination of creativity and common sense to secure a global media platform for its ideas, thereby increasing the visibility of the struggle. According to sociologist Håkan Thörn, "After decades of difficulty reaching out to a wider audience through the established media, there was no doubt that the anti-apartheid movement had, through its informational and media activism, a considerable impact on the ways that apartheid/anti-apartheid was represented by the established global media."

While some dissident movements voice satisfaction with the amount and tenor of mass media coverage, dissidents are more often less than content with the media's reporting of their efforts. Activists often object to the media's tendency to focus on their outward appearance and novel tactics rather than their ideas, critiques, and alternative socio-political programs. In a comment typical of dissident disgruntlement with media coverage, author Naomi Klein asserts that the Global Justice Movement was "hammered in the press as tree-wearing, lamb-costumed, drum-beating bubble
brains” rather than portrayed as principled dissidents resisting economic practices that they considered unfair.¹⁰

Such dissatisfaction emerges from a dialectic of escalation—an ongoing, back-and-forth spiral between dissidents and journalists—whereby in order to be dubbed newsworthy by the traditional media and to punch through the din of “new media,” dissidents must generate protests that are novel and dramatic. After all, as the saying goes, “If it’s not new, it’s not news.” This journalistic demand leads to attention-grabbing dissent that may be rejected for being glitzy, goofy, or downright zany by the political officials and the general public if it is trying to reach. Thus dissident citizens often sacrifice substantive media coverage of their goals and principles on the altar of an ever-dwindling mass media attention span.¹¹ Media systems vary across the global media terrain. Yet, the professional norms and values that guide journalism, in combination with the conservative tendencies within media outlets as corporate entities, lead media coverage to detract and dismiss—rather than buoy or boost—dissent.

Although mass media are vital to dissident citizens, political scientists Dominique Wisler and Marco Giugni argue that the relationship between the media and dissent has been “largely overlooked” in social movement research.¹² This article makes use of mass media output and scholarly research to counter this trend, offering an empirical typology for the mass media’s suppression of dissent. This typology delimits four forms of media-based suppression that put dissident citizens and social movements on the defense: censorship; bi-level demonization; mass media depreciation; and mass media underestimation, false balance, or disregard. Recent historical data from episodes of contention around the globe clarify how this suppression plays out on the ground.

Method 1: Censorship. Censorship is the most direct way that the state and media combine forces to stifle dissent. There are qualitatively distinct types of censorship, from full-fledged, govern-

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on the media, but the Chinese government still wields immense influence over what becomes—or does not become—news. As more and more media outlets become financially independent from the government, they experience greater freedom. Yet as recent imbroglios over Internet censorship demonstrate, the media are far from autonomous, and citizens are still not free to speak their minds. Jack Linchuan Qiu notes that the government uses “the Great Firewall” and a “hierarchical structure of regulation” to exclude “politically unreliable” or “ideologically undesirable” Internet users, imposing a “virtual censorship” that prevents the integration of China’s domestic cyberspace with foreign cyberspace.  

The Communist Party’s Central Propaganda Department (CPD) is responsible for enforcing virtual and traditional censorship in China. Journalists who refuse to follow its dictates are often demoted, dismissed, or charged with libel. They are occasionally imprisoned, as in 2004, when a journalist posted on the Internet the CPD’s directive on how journalists should cover the fifteenth anniversary of the Tiananmen Square uprising. For his online crime, the journalist was sentenced to a ten-year prison term. China is perennially the country that jails the most journalists.  

China is not alone when it comes to censorship. According to Jabbar Audah al-Obaidi, “censorship and the notion of governmental information sovereignty have become...an entrenched phenomenon in the Middle East.” Despite the recent development of independent news outlets like al-Jazeera and Abu Dhabi TV, there is still a great deal of direct media manipulation in the Middle East. For instance, in June 2001, the government of Yemen used defamation charges to shut down the weekly newspaper al-Shura. According to Hanny Megally of Human Rights Watch, “Charges of defamation are being used on a regular basis to silence journalists and close down newspapers” in Yemen. Additionally, the Yemeni government imposed a flogging sentence on journalist Abd al-Jabbar Saad. He was condemned to eighty lashes for allegedly defaming a leader of al-Islah, the most prominent Islamist party in Yemen.  

Other countries in the Middle East like Saudi Arabia, Oman, Iran, Syria, and the United Arab Emirates use sophisticated filtering software to prevent the dissemination of political and social information deemed offensive or imperitantly provocative. In the case of Saudi Arabia, the government focused its attention on political web sites critical of the ruling monarchy, as well online sources for pornography and gambling.  

**Method 2: Bi-level Demonization.** Bi-level demonization is a two-step process involving the state and the media that has deleterious effects on the practice of dissent. In step one, the state establishes an external enemy by portraying the individual or group as dislikable and dangerous. In the second step, the state links a domestic dissident or group to the external demon via religion, ideology, ethnicity, race, or nationality. In both steps the media play the crucial role in proliferating the state’s agenda. The connections—whether real or imagined—flow through the media, stigmatizing dissenters. This puts them on the defensive and encourages them to turn to self-justification and damage control, leaving less tactical space for dissenters to pursue their socio-political goals.
In the post-9/11 era, bi-level demonization has become a widespread method of suppression by linking dissenters with varying motivations to the demon of "terrorism" in general or more directly to Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda. For instance, the Bush administration and its allies have labeled radical environmentalists who have committed politically motivated arson "eco-terrorism." One day after 9/11, Representative Don Young (R-AK), pointed an accusatory finger at activists by stating on the House floor, "I'm not sure they're that dedicated, eco-terrorists—which are really based in Seattle—but there's a strong possibility that could be one of the groups" responsible for the terrorist acts. The Associated Press disseminated this wildly incorrect assessment to news outlets across the country.  

The "domestic terrorism" label, as delineated in Section 802 of the USA PATRIOT Act, has been affixed to groups like the Earth Liberation Front and Animal Liberation Front. After the FBI's "Operation Backfire" led to the indictment of numerous environmental activists, FBI Director Robert Mueller articulated the logic of bi-level demonization, "Terrorism is terrorism—no matter the motive...Today's indictment marks significant progress in our efforts to combat animal rights extremism and eco-terrorism." The media's habit of turning to authority figures as news sources paves a path—if an inadvertent one—for bi-level demonization. For example, when covering Mueller's press conference, the New York Times published a number of terrorism-invoking charges from government officials and uncritically used the term "eco-terrorist."  

President Bush's "War on Terror" has spurred bi-level demonization in other parts of the world—numerous governments squelch their political adversaries and enemies by transforming them into "terrorists." The media play a key role, transmitting the state's vilifying assertions at face value. For example, while the Russian press often assumed an oppositional stance when Boris Yeltsin intensified the crisis with Chechnya, it largely went along with Vladimir Putin's effort to reframe the ongoing conflict as another front in the "War on Terror." In a Moscow News article, President Putin went so far as to compare Chechen separatists to Osama bin Laden.  

Similarly after 9/11, the Chinese government hasconcertedly linked separatists in Xinjiang province to Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda. Borrowing from the "War on Terrorism" rhetoric, Chinese officials claimed Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda had supplied the Xinjiang separatists with money, weaponry, and training in order to help them "launch a 'holy war' aimed at setting up a theocratic 'Islamic state' in Xinjiang." By linking the ethnic Uighurs—who wish to separate from China and form their own country, East Turkistan—to international terrorism, the Chinese government is tacitly justifying severe suppression. According to Dilixiazi Rasheed of the East Turkistan Information Center, this alleged linkage is a complete fabrication: "The reason why they're making it is because they want to crack down on anyone exercising freedom of speech to demand autonomy, by linking them to terrorist crimes." Regardless of whether Rasheed is correct, he offers a working definition of the dynamic that undergirds bi-level demonization. All too often, global media workers uncritically diffuse the state's denigrating portrayals of dissent.
Method 3: Mass Media Deprecation. Historian Melvin Small notes, "The media tend to support those who operate within the system and denigrate oppositional activities of ordinary citizens." This denigration is sometimes conducted in collusion with state authorities. But media suppression goes beyond cooperation with the state, since negative portrayals of dissident citizens are an outgrowth of norms and values entrenched within the media system.

Mass media deprecation is the denigrating or negative framing of dissidents and their movements. Portrayals of dissidents as marginal characters wandering the ideological and tactical fringes hinder social movements that aim to gain new recruits and get their ideas to the undecided or ambivalent public. The proclivities of modern-day news production—like novelty, dramatization, personalization, and use of authorities as sources—allow for the depiction of dissidents as zany, extremist, or out of the mainstream.

Social movements are seen by the general public through the lens of mass media framing. According to media scholar Robert Entman, "to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described." By selecting certain aspects of dissent and rendering them salient, the media play a key role in political power machinations. By focusing on the superficial, personalized, dramatic, and novel aspects of social movement adherents rather than on the socio-political ideas and opinions these dissidents support, the mass media are making a decision that can often undermine dissent.

Activists around the world have experienced mass media deprecation. In the fall of 2007, Burma experienced waves of pro-democracy, anti-government street protests. The military junta responded with force, and numerous protesters—including Buddhist monks—were rounded up, detained, or killed. Building on a long history of authoritarianism and repression, the state-controlled media pinned the blame on ostensibly external agitators and spoke derogatorily of the protesters. While the state asserted the need to use force because the protesters were violent, the compliant media dubbed dissidents and international critics "liars attempting to destroy the nation."

Such mass media deprecation extends beyond the Global South. In her analysis of the British daily press's coverage of the Global Justice Movement's 2001 May Day protests, Karin Wahl-Jorgensen discovered that media spoke of the protests "in terms of their damaging effects on law and order and on the economy, and by making a spectacle out of the protesters' incompetence." This assessment reverberates with Kevin DeLuca and Jennifer Peeples's research on media coverage of the Global Justice Movement: "Such media labels are the first step to dismissing the protesters as Luddites, Nativists, simpletons, or unruly college kids who are simply against things and do not understand the realities of the world." Deprecatory media framing has real-world outcomes since it makes it more difficult for social movements to gain new recruits, maintain solidarity among participants, and mobilize popular support.

Method 4: Mass Media Under-estimation, False Balance, or Disregard. In addition to these forms
of mass media suppression, dissident social movements may also be hobbled through crowd underestimation, false balance, and disregard. Dissident citizens and state officials routinely present vastly different estimates of protest size, with the state underestimating crowd totals and activists overestimating. This forces journalists to be arbiters between differing estimates. During the Vietnam War, Small notes "most of the time the media accepted police or government crowd estimates as the 'official' estimates, and usually used those figures in their headlines or first paragraphs." Todd Gitlin agrees with this assessment of anti-war resistance media coverage in the United States, arguing that "disparagement by numbers," or what he calls "under-counting," was a core framing device.

While balance is a traditional pillar of journalism, it can be misleading when applied uncritically. When the media engage in false balance they give opposing sides equal time, column inches, or weight, even when the abstract notion of balance does not align with on-the-ground reality. For instance, media outlets misrepresent dissent by falsely balancing dissidents with counter-demonstrators, even when the former far outnumber the latter. Gitlin dubs this practice "polarization"—the tendency to highlight reactionary counter-demonstrators and portray them in balance with anti-war protesters—and argues it was a common feature of U.S. media coverage of Vietnam War protesters’ parlance.

False balance can also arise by giving an equal number of articles or column inches to demonstrators and counter-demonstrators. Covering the 100,000-person anti-Iraq War protest in Washington, D.C. in fall 2005, the Oregonian ran a single story with one photograph. The newspaper reported on the counter-demonstration—which drew a mere 400 people—with a slightly longer story and larger photo. Such coverage gives the impression that these protest groups are of equal number and credibility.

Even though protest events cohere to the media's story-selection logic, the media disregards numerous episodes of contention. When the mass media ignore social movements, they exert a subtle form of suppression that affects the ability of dissidents to disseminate their ideas to the general public. In his research on German newspaper coverage of protest events in Freiburg, Peter Hocke came across an "astonishing finding"—national newspapers reported on an "extremely low" number of dissident actions that occurred in the city, a mere 4.6 percent of the total number of significant protests. Hocke calls this an "enormous

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Rethinking Accountability and Balance. The media, the state, and dissident citizens are enmeshed in a dialectic of restriction and resistance, whereby the state and media tend to restrict dissent and activists either resist or adapt to the imposed constraints. This
paper offers an empirical typology that classifies the ways in which the media suppress dissent. Sometimes the media engage in direct methods of suppression like censorship, but—especially in nominal democracies—the media suppress dissent in a more subtle fashion, ratcheting the brackets of acceptable political discourse and bounding what is acceptable political activity. This typology’s goal is to afford researchers greater analytical focus as they study the relationship between the mass media and dissident citizens.

Thomas Jefferson commented that “information is the currency of democracy.” With that in mind, there are many paths journalists can take to improve the quality of information available to the public, thereby strengthening democracy. First, while there are instances when reporting on events might jeopardize global or national security, journalists need to be more critical and courageous when government officials flash the national security trump card. Resisting self-censorship is not easy—especially when working on a controversial issue under the pressure-cooker of geopolitical conditions—but autonomy is the backbone of the journalist-as-watchdog ideal. Journalists should also demand proof when domestic protesters are linked to international enemies. It is not always easy, but media workers need to slice through the rhetoric to find the facts, holding governments and dissident citizens accountable to their stated definitions along the way.

Additionally, journalists could do a better job of digging beneath the surface to explain why people are protesting; they should not fall prey to flashy style over wonky substance. Journalists should also embrace the responsibility of making their own crowd estimates, since the approximations of state officials and protesters are often off the mark. This is easier with some forms of protest—like marches that follow a planned route as opposed to spontaneous demonstrations—but it is worth pursuing.

Finally, a deep, honest look at the norm of balanced reporting is long overdue. In 1996, the Society of Professional Journalists removed the term “objectivity” from its ethics code. The professional norms of journalism are an ever-evolving project. It is time for journalists to consider additional changes to their performance codes as they attempt to widen the dialogue in America’s over two hundred year experiment with democracy.

NOTES

1 For an overview of “new media” and their socio-cultural and politico-economic importance, see Terry Flew, New Media: An Introduction (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).


5 Doug McAdam, “The Framing Function of Movement Tactics: Strategic Dramaturgy in the American Civil Rights Movement,” in Comparative Per-

spectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings, eds. Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 339.


9 Håkan Thörn, “Social Movements, the Media


25 “Putin Says No More Dialogue with Chechen Terrorists,” *Moscow Times*, 8 September 2004,


34 Small, *Covering Dissent*, 162.


