

## Introduction

For the last two centuries, Americans whose concerns and interests lay outside the accepted political boundaries of the day have organized social movements as the principal vehicle for advancing their cause. Their journals have been their most important tool and have been applied to almost every task these movements undertook. The history of social movements and the history of their press are often nearly inseparable, and historians frequently peg the birth of a social movement to the founding of the movement's first journal.

It is therefore surprising that the history of the social movement press has been studied so little.<sup>1</sup> I suspect this is largely due to the fact that when judged by the standards typically used to assess the importance of mainstream publications—total circulation, advertising revenue, length of book, longevity, “professionalism,” “objectivity,” and “lack of bias”—social movement publications appear to have been of negligible importance. Yet even the most cursory review of the social movement press reveals the mistake of judging it by these standards.

It is my contention that the history of social movement journalism can be understood only *in the context of the particular movements of which each journal was a part*: its internal dynamics and strategies,

its relation with its immediate adversary, its relation with the state, and its location in the broader culture (for example, the constitution of “abolitionists” as the predominant voice against slavery, the direct conflict between abolitionists and Southern slaveholders, the complex relation between abolitionists and the federal government, and the place of abolitionism in the broader culture, particularly in the North). Each of these four components is highly dynamic; together, they create a context of continuous change.

As a result of this fluidity, there is no schematic framework that can simplify the analysis of social movement dynamics. Therefore, there is no substitute for a nuanced and detailed historical analysis of the social movement press in the context of the movement of which it is a part. Conventional measures of a journal’s importance, such as circulation, financial stability, and longevity, may—or may not—be meaningful indicators of the significance of a movement publication. Movement publishers who cling single-mindedly to these objectives may miss crucial opportunities to contribute to overall movement goals, and historians committing the same error may similarly underestimate (or overestimate) the importance of movement journals.

With proper attention to historical detail, however, we find that the social movement press—including journals of seemingly marginal importance at first glance—has played a critical role in the constant process of reinventing American society.

“Objectivity,” circulation, longevity, geographic distribution, and advertising revenue are commonly considered universal standards by which the importance of newspapers and magazines can be measured. For the corporate media, however, these measures are tools for maximizing profits, not ends in themselves. As such they are quite useful. Any business plan for running a publication as a profit-making endeavor must incorporate all these tools in a thoughtful and ongoing way. Advertising revenue generates profit. Circulation supports advertising. Longevity keeps the money coming. A

large geographic distribution diversifies the profit base and shields against local downturns.

“Objectivity” is the ideological rationale for the whole enterprise. “Objective” and “unbiased” became media buzzwords only as a direct offshoot of the concentration of media ownership. Prior to the giant media oligopolists, these notions were conspicuously absent from American journalism. Newspapers and magazines were published because the people who created them had a point of view they wanted to get across and made no bones about it. The notion that journalists should—or even could—write without a viewpoint or opinion emerged as a necessary ideological underpinning of media oligopoly, the selling point for the idea that media control by the few is not inherently detrimental to democratic institutions or culture.

Social movement journalism seeks to promote ideas, not profits; movement journals seek to challenge corporate control of media, not justify it. They address readers as members of communities, not individual consumers. They cover social movements as participants, not “observers.” They exist to make change, not business. If the political context of a given movement at a particular time offers conditions in which a long-lived, large-circulation, profit-making journal can be strategically employed to further movement goals, then these are meaningful accomplishments. If such conditions are not present, these measures may be irrelevant.

This is not to imply that social movement publications always come up short by the standards of corporate journalism. The *Sierra Club Bulletin* (now just *Sierra*) has been in continuous publication for more than a hundred years. The *Earth First! Journal* made a small profit beginning with its very first issue (mainstream publications typically expect a year, or more of red ink on the corporate ledger). Some gay and lesbian publications now produce profits that make the corporate giants envious (and the journals possible takeover targets). The AIDS epidemic, one of the biggest stories of the twentieth century, was first reported by a volunteer writer in the *New York*

*Native*, a gay community paper less than one year old at the time. Gay papers consistently scooped the mainstream press in coverage of the epidemic for years afterward.

William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator*, by contrast, had nothing along these lines to recommend it. It was a one-man operation that never had a "scoop." In fact, it rarely had news at all in the conventional meaning of the term. It consistently lost money and at its peak had only three thousand subscribers, yet it remains one of the most influential newspapers in U.S. history. Its demand for immediate, as opposed to gradual, emancipation moved from the outer fringe of the abolitionist movement to its core, and then to national policy with the Emancipation Proclamation. Its uncompromising voice spread well beyond abolitionists to inspire and inform early women's rights activists and many others. It even bequeathed us the term "Garrisonian," an adjective first used to describe the most militant brand of abolitionism and later generalized to indicate an uncompromising willingness to speak one's mind on social-justice issues, regardless of the consequences.

Frederick Douglass, a former slave, had to lecture constantly and mortgage his home simply to keep his papers in print, yet he is considered one of the giants of American political writing. One hundred years later, *Not Man Apart*, published by Friends of the Earth with little money, few volunteer writers, and a circulation of thirty-five thousand, was more influential in its day than any other environmental journal, including the *Sierra Club Bulletin* (which then had a circulation of three hundred thousand) and *Greenpeace* (with a circulation of more than a million).

If profitability and circulation are not reliable measures of the contribution of movement publications to the overall goals of the movement of which they are a part, what about other conventional standards, such as longevity? Duration of publication is certainly a measure by which the wheat of American journalism is typically separated from the chaff.

Here again we find influential journals at both ends of the spectrum, with no reliable correlation between longevity and contribu-

tion to movement goals. The *Sierra Club Bulletin / Sierra* has been publishing continuously for more than a century. *Walker's Appeal* and the early woman suffrage pamphlets were one-issue affairs. *The Furies* became “legendary” among lesbians in the second half of the twentieth century, despite having published for less than a year.

*The Liberator* set an early standard with thirty-five years of uninterrupted publication, spanning the period from the earliest articulation of “abolitionism” to the legal abolition of slavery. But what if abolition had been achieved in ten years instead of thirty-five? *The Liberator* would not have entered the historical record with its lofty thirty-five years; but would the reduced life span indicate a less successful journal or a *more* successful one?

In both the abolitionist and woman suffrage movements, even the softer-focused, larger-circulation publications went into a tail-spin in the period just prior to victory, with many publications closing their doors. In both cases, however, the demise was a consequence of the movements’ concerns moving to the front page of the mainstream press. Here again, was the termination of so many publications a sign of the journals’ failure or of their success?

Longevity is a particularly interesting conundrum in that it is equally prized by the profit-driven media *and* by most movement publishers. Although nearly all movement publishers acknowledge that making a profit is not what movement publishing is about, many still believe that the longevity of their publication is a certain indicator of their contribution to their cause. This notion is a particular manifestation of the conventional activist wisdom that gives priority to building lasting institutions that can outlive the transitory character of activist upsurges and thus “build for the long haul.” The idea is that by outliving the upsurge that created them, institutions such as journals can continue to further their cause and remain at the ready so that when the next upsurge comes, the movement will have seasoned organizations ready to roll and not have to “reinvent the wheel.” This notion too does not hold up well under historical scrutiny.

The tiny gay and lesbian papers that emerged in the 1950s and early 1960s assembled a remarkable track record. They fought for and won the right to publish and distribute materials that discussed homosexuality. They developed a dedicated core of increasingly confident and experienced activists and a loyal readership. By conventional reckoning, they should have been perfectly positioned to lead the charge if a real mass movement emerged. But when “gay liberation” exploded in the aftermath of Stonewall, these publications appeared confused and outdated, and they quickly folded. After years of barely eking out an existence in the desert, they starved in the midst of abundance. The movement itself, however, was none the worse for it, as new publications more in tune with the times sprung up.

What of the environmental movement? After decades of “long-haul” journalism as the most prominent voice of “conservationism” and “outdoor enthusiasts,” the *Sierra Club Bulletin* should have been perfectly positioned for the 1960s and the birth of “environmentalism.” It even had an editor well suited to the job in the form of David Brower, who tried everything within his considerable personal powers to cajole the journal forward into the new era. The result was that Brower was run out of the organization and started a new journal, the aforementioned *Not Man Apart*, with substantially less money, fewer staff—and more clout.

If the record of journals attempting to make the transition from an era of relative quiescence to a time of widespread activism is one of failure, what of those journals which emerged during a movement’s heyday and survived the subsequent decline? Here the record is even worse.

The pioneer gay glossy *The Advocate* is a particularly dramatic example. Launched as a community-based journal to track police violence against homosexuals, *The Advocate* reinvented itself as a slick “lifestyle” magazine; it not only managed to survive the decline of gay radicalism but attained a commercial success unparalleled in the history of social movement journalism, with major advertising accounts, Wall Street investors, and substantial profits. Yet in

terms of social-justice advocacy, the latter-day *Advocate* has been simply awful. The quality of its content traces a trajectory almost the exact inverse to its profitability.

The underground press of the 1960s fared no better. The few underground papers that survived the waning of the counterculture did so through an increasing reliance on sex ads in the personals, a tradition that began as an expression of “free love” ethics and degenerated into fairly unexceptional pornography. And then there was *Rolling Stone*, which secured an advertising base by explicitly purging the counterculture of radical politics.

Journals that closed when they sensed their time was up appear in a comparatively appealing light. These range from Garrison’s *Liberator* to the 1970s’ lesbian journal *Amazon Quarterly*. Once abolition was achieved, Garrison abruptly and unceremoniously shut his paper down, despite widespread criticism by his allies. Gina Covina of the *Amazon Quarterly* went straight to the point when she noted, “When we quit to pursue other interests, we didn’t feel guilty because we weren’t, by any means, leaving a vacuum. . . . There were lots of other papers. We weren’t needed in the same way we had been.”<sup>2</sup>

This conundrum is rooted in the very nature of institutions in general and the particularities of movement journals in specific. Social power is always exercised through institutions, be they banks or mafias, armies or churches, states or families, antislavery committees or environmental journals. By creating a stable set of relations among their members and rules for their behavior, institutions make it possible to aggregate social resources and personal energies. These very things, these fixed rules and relations, make institutions by nature resistant to change, to at least some degree. Yet institutions function in a social milieu of constant change. This confrontation between institutional rigidity and social fluidity results in perennial endeavors of institutional reform, and movement publications are no exception. In general, building an institution is a difficult project, and reforming an existing institution is often a more efficient strategy than launching a new one.

As institutions go, however, the start-up costs associated with launching a movement journal are remarkably low; a handful of people (or even one person) and a few dollars have often been sufficient. The cost of reforming an existing journal may be much higher. Movement journals are typically staffed by people who work long hours for little or no pay and who often perceive challenges to their existing way of doing things as invalidating the many sacrifices they have made. This accounts for the conspicuous failure of most movement journals to outlast the particular social and political context in which they emerge, and for the ease with which they are often replaced by new journals more in tune with the times. *Mother Earth News* is one of the very rare exceptions to this pattern; emerging from the widespread “back-to-the-land” movement of the 1970s, the journal managed to transition from an activist-run publication to a professional enterprise without losing focus on its core social and political objectives.

This book is not a chronological history of the varied fortunes of the major social movement publications. Since it is my thesis that social movement publications can be judged only by their integration into a viable movement strategy, the publications are grouped according to movement, not time. Nor do I attempt an exhaustive history of all the journals in all social movements in American history, a mammoth undertaking that would lead us far from the issues on which I wish to focus. Instead, I concentrate on a few movements that, taken together, highlight the complexity of the interplay between the journals, the social movements that produced them, and the social and political conditions the movements sought to address. These include the abolitionist, woman suffrage, gay and lesbian, and environmental movements, as well as the underground GI press during the Vietnam War.

This collection will allow for a broad mix of issues of class, race, gender, and age; of movements whose goals were as specific as abolishing slavery, enfranchising women, ending the American military adventure in Vietnam and as broad and diffuse as countering ho-

mophobia throughout the culture or protecting the environment. It will take our gaze to every region in the nation, and then beyond its borders. It will carry us from the sparse, privately owned media environment of the nineteenth century to the corporate media saturation of the present. Last but certainly not least, it will frame the book with the most important innovations in printing technology since the invention of the printing press: the invention of the iron press and machine-made paper at the start of the nineteenth century, which made the abolitionist press possible; the invention of offset printing, which fueled the radical upsurge of the 1960s and 1970s; and the development of desktop publishing in the 1980s and 1990s, which gave rise to the zine explosion. The book will end with the emergence of the Internet, which in some ways signals the end of the era of the social movement press. By starting in 1830 and ending in the present, this work will span the entire era.

This approach leaves some venerable publications out of our frame. *The Appeal to Reason*, the standard-bearer of the socialist movement and one of the most successful movement papers ever, will not make an appearance, since the socialist movement of the early twentieth century is not examined. Also absent are journals that contributed to many movements yet were not rooted in any particular one; these include *The Nation* (the granddaddy of them all, which has published since 1865); *The Catholic Worker*, *Liberation*, *I. F. Stone's Weekly* (all maintained a progressive voice in the wasteland of the 1950s, but they were lonely voices in the wilderness); and *Mother Jones* (which has consistently published major-impact investigative pieces on environmental issues). More mainstream publications that have made significant contributions to movement objectives are also omitted. *The New Yorker*, for example, played a major role in the formulation of early environmentalism when it published serialized versions of both Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in the 1960s and Barry Commoner's *Closing Circle* in the 1970s. Urban weeklies have in many cases published investigative environmental pieces of regional or local significance.

As important as these journals are, their inclusion would have

confused this study, not clarified it. The *Washington Post*, for example, was crucial to ending the Vietnam War, since its Watergate reporting was key to bringing down the political coalition that waged it. Yet to conclude that the *Washington Post* was thus somehow a movement journal would be absurd. My interest is not in the professional journalists working for mainstream institutions deeply embedded in the power structures of American society, who were professionally trained for their trade at prestigious institutions of higher learning, and who ultimately are accountable to a corporate board of directors. Rather, I am interested in the “accidental” journalists who, out of a sense of social justice, volunteered to do whatever was needed for a particular cause and ended up as journalists.

People in positions of institutional power, whether generals, politicians, bankers, and even journalists, exercise some degree of social power during the course of their everyday professional lives. For everyone else, if we seek to have a voice in shaping our society beyond our immediate social circle, we have to step outside our daily existence into roles to which we are not accustomed and for which we have little or no institutional support. We have to band together to maximize our very limited time and resources. Before we can do any of that, we have to find each other—identify others with the same interests who are also willing to step outside their daily lives to pursue our long-shot objectives. We have to see who’s good at what, who else is doing what, who might rise to the occasion if given half a chance. We have to make plans, formulate strategies, set priorities. We have to agitate, educate, mobilize, confront, and more. In short, we have to constitute ourselves as a political subject, a constituency, a *social movement*. And if we had done this sometime between 1830 and 2000, we would have made a newspaper. In most cases, it would have been the first thing we did.

I stated at the outset that there is no schematic framework that can simplify the analysis of social movement dynamics, no “stages” theory of social movements, and therefore no substitute for nuanced and detailed historical analysis of movement publications in the

context of the movement of which they were a part. The movements included in this book demonstrate my point. The trajectory of the abolitionist movement is the most neatly linear. The goal of immediate abolition of slavery with full political rights for slaves emerged as a consensus after years of debate between various alternatives. Once abolitionism took off, it witnessed a relatively steady increase in its number of adherents in its first thirty years—men and women who grew increasingly militant and vocal. The goal of woman suffrage likewise emerged out of a variety of ideas for the advancement of women's rights, accompanied by an upsurge of militant activity. But then the movement fell into decades of "doldrums" during which it adopted an increasingly mainstream, genteel tenor. Final victory came with a whimper, not a bang.

The gay and lesbian movement followed an altogether different trajectory. Accumulating momentum very gradually in the 1950s and early 1960s, it suddenly exploded into a mass movement when its trickle of activists flowed into the mighty river of 1960s radicalism. This momentum lasted well into the 1970s, creating a golden age of "gay liberation" when breathtaking victories were won in a stunningly short period of time. The movement then began to disintegrate, until the AIDS epidemic forced the community back into political mobilization.

The GI movement is even more narrowly bound by the period of U.S. military intervention in Vietnam. The movement grew from nothing at the outset of the 1960s to a power that brought the world's most formidable military to a grinding halt, then quickly dissipated when U.S. combat operations in Southeast Asia ceased.

The environmental movement offers yet another trajectory. The movement's key victories (the creation of the EPA, the Clean Water Act, and the Endangered Species Act, among them) date from the widespread activism of the 1960s and 1970s. Since that time, as the global environmental catastrophe has become increasingly apparent, the issue has gained a more or less permanent place in the corporate media. This has helped create a continuous widespread interest in the issue and broad support in opinion polls, yet most

“members” of environmental organizations limit their activities to mailing checks to national organizations. The crisis this movement seeks to address, meanwhile, presents no clear solutions, such as abolishing slavery, enfranchising women, or withdrawing from Vietnam.

The trajectories of the press that these movements created are just as varied as the movements themselves. The abolitionist and woman suffrage press are the most similar. In both cases, extremely radical fringe journals came first (*The Liberator*, *Revolution*), followed by journals with a progressively softer tone and broader circulation (*National Era*, *Women’s Journal*, *Women’s Column*). Finally, there was an across-the-board decline, and even collapse, of the movements’ journals in the period just before victory was won.

Both movements achieved consensus on one very specific policy objective around which everything in the movement then revolved (immediate emancipation without emigration for the abolitionists and suffrage for women). But consensus was not something the movements were born with; it developed over time. Should emancipation happen gradually or all at once? Should the freed slaves be sent abroad or remain in the United States? Should they have the full political rights of citizenship? Should the U.S. Constitution be replaced or amended? All these questions remained unresolved in the early years of abolitionism. Winning the vote for women likewise emerged only gradually as the consensus objective among nineteenth-century American feminists, whose concerns entailed a much broader vision of women’s rights.

In both movements, it was in the early period, when ideological and policy consensus was up for grabs, that radical journals could hold sway with tiny circulations and no resources other than the passion of their publishers’ convictions and the fire in their words. Once the movement’s direction was settled and the task of the day became winning converts to a generally accepted program, uncompromising adherence to principle became a much less valuable asset, and more conventional assets like financial backing, a sta-

ble staff, and a more flexible appeal increased in importance. The *National Era*, which dominated the later stages of the abolitionist movement, quickly reached a circulation nearly ten times the peak achieved by either Garrison or Frederick Douglass. In the woman suffrage movement, the later and tamer *Women's Journal* quickly outran the *Revolution* by the same proportion.

The gay and lesbian movement, by contrast, never had one objective that if won would constitute "victory." Even the present-day battles over marriage rights and military service do not represent anything close to a consensus in the gay and lesbian movement, and those activists who do prioritize these issues do not imagine that achieving these objectives would constitute anything more than another step on a long journey. The environmental movement is even farther afield, addressing challenges that will never be "won" but only better managed, and which promise to become only more complex and thorny. The path cut by these movements is thus less linear, and the story of what resources are most valuable to movement journals and when is correspondingly more complex.

The *Sierra Club Bulletin* (now *Sierra*), the flagship of the environmental movement press with a huge circulation and the financial muscle of the Sierra Club behind it, has been enormously effective—when it has been used as one element of a broader activist strategy. The publication reached its apogee of influence in the successful fight to prevent the damming of the Grand Canyon, when David Brower used the *Bulletin* in close coordination with grass-roots mobilization, aggressive lobbying, and paid advertising in the *New York Times*. In other periods, when the journal has not been as tightly linked to an audacious political strategy, its clout faded dramatically, despite its having a larger circulation, a more stable staff, and healthier finances.

The *Earth First! Journal* offers another successful example of the strategic use of a journal. The paper was launched with essentially no money and peaked at ten thousand subscribers, yet this was sufficient to achieve the goal its publishers had in mind: not so much

to win policy battles per se as to redefine the left fringe of the movement as a magnet that would pull the entire environmental debate to the left.

My main thesis—that the history of social movement journalism can be understood only in the context of the particular movements of which each journal was a part—can be abbreviated as follows: *words do not make history*. No argument, no matter how brilliantly reasoned or beautifully articulated, can create more democracy. Words are central to this book, but this book is not about words. The fact that I regard the history of the social movement press as a crucial and neglected part of the history of social movements does not mean that I think the social movement press—or any other press—is capable of doing *anything* on its own.

Words matter, but only when something is *done* with them, and the specifics of what is done matter too. It is not just a question of whether words are shared but of *how* they are shared. How do words make it to the page (or the screen or the microphone)? How are the pages distributed? By what means do the recipients respond? How are the resources for the whole effort marshaled? What social relationships develop as a consequence? How do these relationships dovetail with other relationships in the constitution of a social movement? How do those relationships fit into the broader culture? How can they be deployed when the movement confronts its adversaries?

The ultimate impact of social movements on society has everything to do with the resources that movements bring to such confrontations. Those resources might include almost anything: money, guns, land, technical expertise, votes, education, social history, cultural coherence, communication channels, access to the means of production, the means of culture, the means to disrupt the social peace. Full-blown theories of social movements and social change must account for all of these. This book examines just one: the press the movements themselves create. Overarching theories of social power and social change are thus beyond the reach of this study.

Although the movement press is just one resource among many, it is a very particular and important one. Because it is simple to establish, a rudimentary press is easily within the reach of even the most resource-poor movements. It is extremely malleable and capable of quick reconfiguration. The fact that it is often the first tool for which a movement reaches should come as no surprise. Words are what we use to think. Without descending into the arcana of academic debates on language and knowledge, we must address the fundamental fact that social actors—whether individual or collective—must constitute themselves through words. For social movements in the period I have studied, the printed word was supreme. The broadcast word, when it appeared, was nearly always beyond their reach, and the digital word did not yet exist.

If context is the key to understanding the social movement press, there is no element of context more important than the increasingly dense web of communications we call media. What it meant for the Sierra Club to have its own magazine was completely different in 1895, 1965, and 2005. Since the appearance of *Freedom's Journal* in New York City in 1827, the media have grown from a handful of newspapers in a few major cities into an environment in which we are so totally immersed that we often don't notice its presence. Media images and sounds are as inescapable to us as the natural environment once was to agricultural societies. For many people, these sounds and images constitute the whole of contemporary culture, defining their nation, their community, and even their families and individual identities. There is, however, nothing natural about this media-drenched world. It has been constructed by people, and overwhelmingly for one central reason: profit.

The limited print media of the nineteenth century was joined by movies, then radio, and then television. Television itself moved from a few homes to all homes, then to multiple rooms in many homes. According to Nielsen Media Research, by the end of the twentieth century 98.1 percent of U.S. households had at least one television, and 50 percent had three or more. These televisions were

turned on an *average* of 7 hours and 12 minutes a day. The average American spends the equivalent of 70 days of nonstop TV watching per year, and by the age of sixty-five she or he will have spent nearly 9 years glued to the tube.<sup>3</sup>

Advertising, once largely confined to television, radio, and print, has become a sort of expeditionary force infiltrating every conceivable social space. Banks sell advertising to fill the few seconds at an ATM between a customer's last push of a button and the magical appearance of the requested cash, ensuring that no American spends even a few commercial-free seconds before a screen. Telephone services offer free minutes to customers who are willing to keep the phone to their ear for a few minutes of advertising. Go out for a beer, and chances are your view at the bar will include multiple screens, each with different content. A trip to the bar's restrooms will bring you eyeball to eyeball with small billboards managed by corporate agencies, lest the time you spend there be lost to the world of corporate marketing. Numerous "stealth-marketing" techniques have turned movie plots, concerts, and even private conversations into marketing events.

Who owns all this? In 1983, when Ben Bagdikian published the first edition of *The Media Monopoly*, 50 corporations dominated the U.S. mass media, and the biggest media merger in history was a \$340 million deal. By 1987 those 50 corporations had shrunk to 29. By 1997 the 29 had shrunk to 10, one of which was created in the \$19 billion merger of Disney and ABC. Just three years later, the end of the century saw the 10 shrink to just 5 amid the \$350 billion merger of AOL and Time Warner, a deal more than a thousand times larger than "the biggest deal in history" just seventeen years earlier. As Bagdikian noted in his 2004 edition, "In 1983, the men and women who headed the first mass media corporations that dominated American audiences could have fit comfortably in a modest hotel ballroom. . . . By 2003, [they] could fit in a generous phone booth."<sup>4</sup> After reviewing FCC data, Senator John McCain concurred, "Five companies control 85 percent of our media sources."<sup>5</sup>

These five firms are among the world's largest corporations. All

are listed in *Fortune* magazine's Global 500 largest corporations in the world. They have integrated horizontally, acquiring control of many newspapers across the nation, which serve different local markets. And they have integrated vertically, controlling newspapers, magazines, book publishing houses, and movie and TV production studios, as well as print distribution systems, cable and broadcast TV networks, radio stations, telephone lines, satellite systems, Web portals, billboards, and more.

"Censorship" is an entirely insufficient description of the effect of corporate media control on our culture. This is not to say that blatant old-school censorship does not exist. Far more common, however, is the more subtle but much more powerful form of censorship that frames news, entertainment, and advertising so as to limit the range of options for social change to those that are consistent with corporate interests. This kind of censorship tends to be self-reinforcing; for example, it is virtually impossible to find any discussion of corporate control of the media in any media that are corporately controlled. "Debate" is then confined within this stunted domain. As comedian Jon Stewart noted, to call this *debate* is akin to calling Pro Wrestling an athletic sporting competition.<sup>6</sup> Finally, it is crucial to note that although the forty-thousand TV commercials the average child sees per year and the two million commercials the average American has seen by the age of sixty-five advertise a wide range of products, they all sell the same fundamental idea: the route to happiness and a better life is through *buying stuff*, and not through any kind of community or collective action.

Of all the stories that are censored, distorted, or simply ignored by the corporate news media, none suffers more than the story of social movements that challenge corporate power. Most often these are simply ignored. Demonstrations or strikes of thousands of people fail to win a mention. When they are visible at all, they are usually as *spectacle*—violence at a demonstration, arrests at a picket line, the financial problems of an organization, or the flamboyance of celebrity leaders. The *substance* of the movements' concerns is nearly always absent. Even more invisible is anything that accu-

rately represents the experience of being part of a movement: the sense of personal transformation and community, the sense of hope, and the satisfaction of participating in history.

There is a countermovement to the corporate media grab; although not on the same scale as the titans of the mass media, it is real, significant and growing. At the outset of the unprecedented social ferment of the 1960s, only a handful of journals reported on the decade's upheaval from a movement perspective. By the end of the decade, the *Alternative Press Index* listed 72 active periodicals on the "alternative" end of the media spectrum; thirty years later, the *Index* included 270 titles, a nearly fourfold increase; and today the 2004 edition of the *Index* lists 385 titles. Similarly, the membership of the Independent Press Association (IPA) has grown from 20 titles when it was launched in 1996 to more than 575 at this writing.

These publications cover a kaleidoscope of constituencies and ideas. *In These Times*, a biweekly alternative newsmagazine, has a conventionally leftist political perspective, a circulation of 12,000, and a history going back 22 years. *Hip Mama*, a quarterly that was started in 1994 by a single mother on welfare, is for parents in non-traditional child-rearing situations and has a circulation of 3,000. *Hues* was launched in 1992 by three 19-year-olds for the benefit of "women who don't meet the conventional, airbrushed image found in most magazines."

There is also a vast and growing "ethnic press." In a 2001 study, the IPA identified 250 ethnic and community newspapers in New York City alone. In 2003 the IPA found another 250 in the Chicago metropolitan area. Some of these publications focus on news from immigrants' home countries, and others on local ethnic communities. Although these papers encompass a wide range of political views, many focus on issues of social justice. And none of these numbers include the thousands of newsletters of local activist organizations or the countless Web zines, blogs, and Web sites that defy simple categorization.

In this age of mass media saturation and expansion of corporate power both globally and domestically, the fact that this vast world of independent media remains beyond the grasp of corporate control gains a political and cultural significance that is above and beyond the political platforms of the individual publications. The independent media form a counterculture in the most literal sense: a culture based in community (however that is defined, and there are many ways) and individual creativity that runs counter to the dominant culture of corporate hegemony and mass consumption. This counterculture will be crucial to whatever the future holds for movements for social justice.

Complex human societies are inherently hierarchical and unjust. Movements for social justice challenge the existing hierarchy and pit the weak against the strong. To the dispassionate observer, the odds for success must always seem remote and often so lopsided that participation in social movements, or even belief in the possibility of social change, appears irrational. Choosing to become active in a movement for social justice involves at its core a leap of faith, a stepping out of predefined social roles. Barry Romo, former leader of Vietnam Veterans Against the War, summed up this transformative experience beautifully:

*Someone once said, "How can you change so quickly?" I said, "Well, it wasn't a question of changing quickly; it was a question of being in shock after taking the blinders off. When you take sunglasses off, the sun shines in: it doesn't trickle in, it doesn't take time, it all becomes bright."*

The creation of a community and culture that invite and then sustain these transformations is crucial to movements facing irrationally long odds. It is here that the social movement press has played its most important role. Learning to write, publish, and distribute a paper is empowering in all aspects of organizing. Finding the words to express oneself, building enough of an organization to

manage the production of a journal, finding the nerve to approach others with the copies—these are experiences that can turn a “no-body” into an agent of social change.

The process snowballs when the finished paper falls into the right hands. Overcoming isolation is often the first step in this transformation, whether the isolation is that of the runaway slave living in fear of the slave hunter, the woman trapped in the social straitjacket of the “housewife,” the closeted homosexual, or the soldier under the constant surveillance of his superiors. Isolation is the great inhibitor of political engagement, the problem at which any social movement must begin. Testimonies down through the decades speak of the singular impact that movement journals have had for individuals in this transformation from passive isolation to engaged citizen.

*It sent a thrill of joy [through my soul]. I loved this paper, and its editor. His words were few, full of holy fire, and straight to the point.*

FREDERICK DOUGLASS ON *THE LIBERATOR*

*In the darkness and gloom of a false theology, I was slowly sawing off the chains of my spiritual bondage. . . . A few bold strokes from the hammer of his truth and I was free! Only those who have lived all their lives under the dark clouds of vague, undefined fears can appreciate the joy of a doubting soul suddenly born into the kingdom of reason and free thought.*

ELIZABETH CADY STANTON ON *THE LIBERATOR*

*A woman would read just one article that touched a certain sensibility in her—and suddenly her life was turned upside down. She embraced the lesbian culture as the center of her very existence. When that process is repeated for women in tiny, isolated communities from coast to coast—women who previously trembled in fear but then began asserting their own self-worth—the impact cannot be measured in mere numbers.*

LESBIAN HISTORY ARCHIVES COFOUNDER

JOAN NESTLE ON *THE LESBIAN TIDE*

*I was exposed to a lot of dissent in college. I would walk through demonstrators in my ROTC uniform. [But the GI paper] really impacted on me personally. I had no other contact at that time with anyone who was antiwar.*

JIM WILLINGHAM ON YOUR MILITARY LEFT

*I am REALLY psyched to be in on the Homocore deal. I can't tell you what a fucking great idea the zine is—gay people and hardcores get such shit and are so pushed down and (the big one) it's SO FUCKING LONELY!*

LETTER TO HOMOCORE, 1998