CURRENT PERSPECTIVES ON COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA RESEARCH

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edition lumière

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The circuit of protest: A conceptual framework for studying the mediation opportunity structure

Bart Cammaerts

Abstract

In this chapter I present an encompassing conceptual framework to study the role of media, communication and mediation in contentious politics. I have called this framework the circuit of protest. This circuit is comprised of four core-moments, namely, the production of movement discourses, frames and collective identities, the self-mediation practices of the movement, the mainstream media representations and the reception of these movement discourses, frames and identities by non-activist citizens. The mediation opportunity structure refers to the dynamic interplay between agentic opportunities and structural constraints operating at each of the four moments of the circuit of protest. Besides this, the chapter also reflects on the methodological implications and challenges of the circuit.

Keywords: mediation, social movements, protest, circulation, multi-method, social change

> the development of new means of communication vital for the smooth
> flow of capital's circuit […] also creates the opportunity for otherwise isolated
> and dispersed points of insurgence to connect and combine with one another.
> The circuit of high-technology capital thus also provides the pathways for the
> *circulation of struggles*.
> (Dyer-Witheford, 1999: 93 – emphasis in original)

1.   Introduction

Given the importance of messaging, the articulation of demands, representation
and public opinion for social movements and protest, it is rather surprising that
it took so long for scholars to acknowledge and research the pivotal role of me-
dia and communication in contentious politics. This does not mean, however, that
there have been no scholars focusing on media and communication in the context
of social movements and protest, but they were a relatively small minority (see
amongst others Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993; Downing, et al., 2001; Koopmans,
2004; Rucht, 2004).

Building on this early work, several scholars, including myself, have in recent
years published a wide range of studies contributing to the theorization of as well
as research on the various ways in which 'the media', but also communication
technologies, are relevant to activists and social movements in the context of their
various struggles (Gerbaudo, 2012; Cammaerts, 2012; Cammaerts et al., 2013; Ka-
vada, 2016). This was strengthened by the cultural turn in social movement studies,
which foregrounded the framing efforts of movements and the discursive aspects
of a social struggle, both of which imply an inherent communicative and dissemi-
native dimension (Benford and Snow, 2000; McCammon, 2007). Besides a focus
on the content of what movements communicate, we can also observe an emphasis
on media practices of social movements, studying what activists actually do with
the media and communication technologies at their disposal (Mattoni and Treré,
2014). This includes a wide range of studies researching the precise role of the In-
ternet for activists and contentious politics (Van Laer and Van Aelst, 2010; Earl and
Kimport, 2011). Another strand of research investigates the way mainstream media
and journalists report on activism and contentious politics, but also how activists
increasingly attempt to manage mainstream media attention (McCurdy, 2012).

These studies and new perspectives were very valuable and important, but
what was lacking, I felt, was an encompassing framework which ties all these

different aspects together and also goes towards theorizing the interconnections between them. In order to address the latter, I proposed the *mediation opportunity structure* (Cammaerts, 2012) as a way to denote the dialectic interplay between the agentic opportunities and structural constraints inherent to mediation processes. The mediation opportunity structure also represents a much-needed conceptual bridge between media and communication studies and social movement studies. Whereas mediation refers to a dialectic communicative process implicating institutions, collectivities and individuals (Silverstone, 2005), the opportunity structure refers to the political, institutional and technological contexts which shape opportunities and constraints for activists and social movements (Koopmans, 1999).

Mediation is a highly suitable and productive concept to relate to contentious politics, as it enables us to approach a set of dichotomies, such as the relationship between alternative media and mainstream media, the symbolic and material aspects of a struggle or the production and reception of meaning, in a dialectical and thus interrelated fashion. In addition to this, Martín-Barbero (1993: 188) made an explicit conceptual connection between what he called 'mediations' and social movements by defining the former as 'the articulations between communication practices and social movements and the articulation of different tempos of development and practice'. In doing so, he imbued popular and mediated culture with the possibility to disrupt and contest the prevailing hegemony. Mass culture, he wrote, 'is the first to allow communication between the different levels of society. Given that complete cultural unity is impossible, what is important is *circulation* between the different levels' within society (ibid.: 35, emphasis added). This highlights the centrality of the circulation of meaning in any analysis of protest movements, but also the potential of change and transformation. As Silverstone (2005: 189) also points out, mediation

> …requires us to understand how processes of communication change the social and cultural environments that support them as well as the relationships that participants, both individual and institutional, have to that environment and to each other.

I propose that the mediation process, which links the production of movement discourses to their circulation through society, can be deconstructed analytically by taking inspiration from the circuit of culture construct as developed in the cultural studies tradition (see Johnson, 1986; Du Gay et al., 1997). The circuit of culture is a conceptual model which enables the empirical study of social and cultural phenomena in a holistic manner without over-privileging structural features or cultural production at the expense of the analysis of agency and/or audience reception.

In what follows, I will discuss the circuit of culture to then develop a conceptual framework for the study of the mediation opportunity structure, namely the *circuit of protest*. I will end this chapter by addressing the methodological consequences of studying the circuit.

2.   The circuit of culture

In his seminal paper, 'Encoding/Decoding', Hall (1980 [1973]) identified four components of cultural production and reception which he used to explain how dominant culture and meanings circulate and are received – production, circulation, use and reproduction. Hall contended that dominant meanings are not reproduced passively and uncritically, but can potentially be resisted or, to use his words, decoded differently.

In response to critique that the encoding/decoding model over-privileged agency to the detriment of structural constraints, and that the four components are articulated as too discrete from each other, Du Gay et al. (1997), whose co-authors included Hall, revised the encoding/decoding model to render it much more dynamic and integrated. The circuit and circulation metaphor, which originates from Marx's circuit of capital (Dyer-Witheford, 1999), was appropriated and repurposed to denote the circulation of meaning. The authors subsequently identified five interconnected moments that make up the *circuit of culture*, namely: 1) production, 2) identity, 3) representation, 4) consumption and 5) regulation. This circuit of culture was represented in such a way that each of the five dimensions influenced the others.

The circuit of culture stresses the importance of studying processes of production in conjunction with the processes of media consumption or the reception of meaning. Proponents of this culturalist approach stress the polysemic nature of media production and reception while, at the same time, emphasizing the importance of differences in the social status and contexts of those encoding and decoding meaning (Hall, 1997). This opened up, they argued, a space for the negotiation or rejection of dominant meanings.
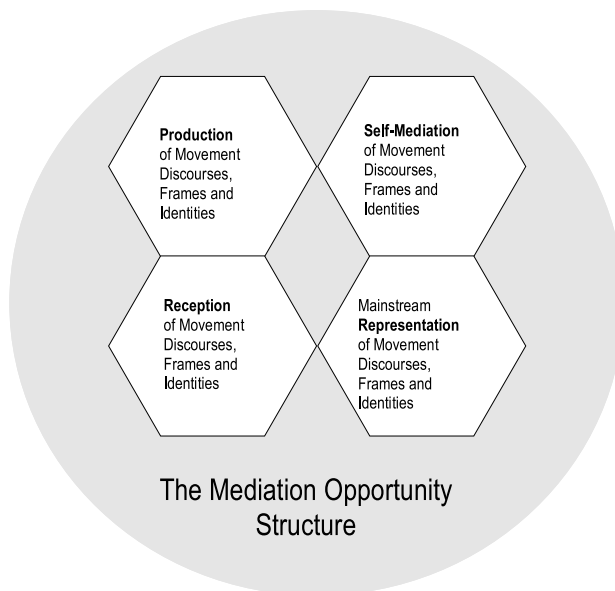
This culturalist approach goes beyond the production/consumption binary and affords greater agency to audiences. In conjunction with cognitive social psychology approaches, this gave rise to notions such as the active audience or the user of technology, both implying less passive actors (Livingstone, 2015).

3.   The circuit of protest

Without necessarily adhering to it fully, I take inspiration from the circuit of culture model discussed above to develop a conceptual framework which theorises the role of mediation in the context of political struggles waged by social movements and activists. The *circuit of protest* diverges from the circuit of culture in being less text-based, less cultural industry focused, and more related to collective than to individual actors and identities. The circuit of protest is comprised of the following four core moments, which all implicate collective identities: production, self-mediation, representation and reception. The mediation opportunity structure operates at each of these four moments and represents the interplay between agentic opportunities and structural constraints.

The circuit of protest represents an encompassing model that positions each moment in the circuit as equally important, and each moment impacts on the other moments (cf. Figure 1). The different moments need to be studied in conjunction with each other so as to analyse and assess the precise nature of this interplay between agentic opportunities and structural constraints present at each of the moments and between them, which subsequently amounts to a specific contextual articulation of the mediation opportunity structure.

Figure 1. The circuit of protest

Production of Movement Discourses, Frames and Identities

Self-Mediation of Movement Discourses, Frames and Identities

Reception of Movement Discourses, Frames and Identities

Mainstream **Representation** of Movement Discourses, Frames and Identities

The Mediation Opportunity Structure

At the level of *production*, social movement actors produce or encode meaning through discourses and frames, whereby the former represents inherent contingency and the latter strategic attempts to fix meaning, to establish ideological boundaries and to construct a 'we' that is juxtaposed to a 'them' (Cammaerts, forthcoming). At this level of analysis, collective identities and ideological enemies are constructed, injustices are invoked, solutions to the problems the movement wants to tackle are imagined, and calls to action are articulated. This tends to align with a set of social movement frames, such as injustice and indignation frames, diagnostic and prognostic frames and motivational or action frames (Gamson, 1992; Benford and Snow, 2000).

The moment of production, as defined here, is situated exclusively at the symbolic – meaning-making – level. In this regard, the double articulation of mediation is highly relevant (Livingstone, 2007). This enables us to situate the mediation of the symbolic at the level of production and mediation as the appropriation and shaping of media and communication technologies in tune with their material affordances at the level of self-mediation practices.

The material dimension of the production of movement discourses, frames and collective identities thus links to *self-mediation* and a set of mediation practices using textual, audio and visual formats, distributed offline and online, locally, nationally and even transnationally. In this regard, different media and communication technologies have different affordances (Hutchby, 2001), affordances that are more or less useful to certain mediation logics relevant to activists. These affordances enable a set of self-mediation practices, which invokes a reference to practice theory (see Couldry, 2004). Some of these activist self-mediation practices are more outwardly focused while others are more inward-looking. There is also a temporal and historical dimension to self-mediation practices, invoking memory and potentially influencing similar or different movements elsewhere, enabling movement spillovers (Cammaerts, 2018).

Besides producing meanings and self-mediating them, social movement actors, the actions they organise and the various discourses and frames they disclose, are also *represented* by mainstream media actors and journalists, situated outside the movement. The cause that is defended, the political opportunity structure, certain journalistic routines, ideological biases, editorial lines, all have an impact on the nature and tone of those mainstream media representations (Cottle, 2008). Whereas mainstream media tend to be negatively biased against protest and social movements, amounting to what some call a protest paradigm, this is by no means always the case. Furthermore, because media resonance remains important to reach non-activist citizens and influence public opinion (Rucht, 2013), social movements

also develop a set of strategies to either cope with, adapt to or resist media routines and media values in their efforts to manage their public visibility (McCurdy, 2014).

Mediation in the context of contentious action is, however, not limited to the production of meaning, a set of mediation practices and the journalistic representations of a movement and its struggle. The ways in which non-activist citizens relate to the mobilizations and ideas of social movements matter too. Hence, the *reception* or decoding of movement discourses and frames from the perspective of extending collective identities and enlarging the scope of conflict is arguably crucially important when studying strategies of social change and their mediations. This implicates the complex process of political opinion formation. In his influencial book Talking Politics, Gamson (1992) suggests that non-activist citizens or audiences form their political opinions not only on the basis of mainstream media content or movement self-representations, but ideological dispositions, experiential knowledge and what is considered to be common sense at a given moment in time and in a specific context also affect people's political views and attitudes. I found similar patterns in my own study (Cammaerts, 2018). Besides, non-activist citizens, political elites could also be implicated at the level of reception, which was not part of my study.

Finally, the *mediation opportunity structure* brings the power dimension at the level of the production, self-mediation, representation and reception of meaning into the fray. Power is understood here as being productive in a Foucauldian sense, i.e. enabling and constraining at the same time and in doing so producing knowledge, subject positions, identities, hegemonies and counter-hegemonies. The mediation opportunity structure thus relates to the dynamic and complex interplay between agency and structure, between generative and repressive forms of power, between domination and resistance, between the power to (empowerment), the power over (domination) and the power in (discourse, subject-positions). Given its dialectical nature, the mediation opportunity structure avoids an overemphasis on the agentic, but, at the same time, it does not close down the potential of agency and fundamental change by privileging structural domination (see Koopmans, 1999).

From a media and communications studies perspective, the circuit implicates the role of media and communication in contentious politics, without being too media- or discourse-centric. As Martín-Barbero (1993) pointed out in relation to the mediation process and circulation, while 'communication has become a strategic arena for the analysis of the obstacles and contradictions that move [societies]' (ibid.: 187), at the same time we have 'to lose sight of the "proper object" [i.e. media] in order to find the way to the movement of the social in communication, to communication in process' (ibid.: 203).

From a social movement studies perspective, the circuit of protest enables us to bridge tensions between resources, agentic opportunities and structural constraints. It furthermore exposes mediation processes both internal and external to social movements and it combines attention to the symbolic and discursive aspects of protest and contestation with material considerations of resources, communicative technologies and a practice-oriented approach.

By studying a social movement through the prism of the circuit, and by implicating mediation as the conceptual glue collating the different moments of the circuit, a holistic picture of a particular struggle emerges, since the circuit enables us to highlight and include in a single study an analysis of:

- the aims, goals and messaging of a movement;
- the collective identity of the movement;
- the nature of the connections and interactions between different actors;
- the internal organizational structures (or lack thereof);
- the type of (direct) actions and protest events the movement enacts;
- the resonance of the movement in the public/media space;
- the resonance of the movement amongst ordinary non-activist citizens;
- the degree of resistance it endures or cooperation it receives from the powers that be.

This also leads to a more nuanced perspective on and complex picture of the degree and nature of success of a movement, which can be situated at various levels and not necessarily only at the level of policy or political change in the here and now.

By appropriating the metaphor of the circuit and applying it to social movement struggles to achieve social and political change, I am aligning myself also with the Glasgow Media Group which stressed the importance of analysing 'processes of production, content, reception and *circulation* of social meaning simultaneously' (Philo, 2007: 175 – emphasis added). However, empirically studying the different moments in conjunction with each other is not straightforward and has important methodological implications which are discussed in the next section.

3.1 *Studying the circuit of protest: Methodological reflections*

In the last section of this short chapter, I aim to shift the focus from the conceptual to the empirical. The different moments in the circuit of protest, as articulated above, require different research methods in order to study and analyse them. This, I would argue, is at once the strength and the weakness of the framework.

A rich and thick data set is needed to study the production of discourses, frames and collective identities by social movements in conjunction with the various self-mediation practices of activists, the mainstream media representations of the movement, and the ways in which these discourses and frames are received and decoded by non-activist citizens. Table 1 provides a tentative overview of possible methods of data collection and analysis for each moment in the circuit. This mixed methods design conforms to the category of *development*, whereby the results of one method are 'used to help inform the development' of subsequent ones (Greene et al., 1989: 260).

Table 1*: Overview of potential data collection and analysis methods for each moment in the circuit*[1]

Moments	Data Collection	Data Analysis
Production	• Desk-research of messages and communication by the movement • Semi-structured interviews of activists • Ethnography and field notes	• Discourse analysis • Frame analysis • Thematic analysis
Self-mediation	• Semi-structured interviews of activists • Collection of print material and/or community radio broadcasts • Desk-research of social media presence and other forms of communication • Ethnography and field notes	• Thematic analysis • Network analysis
Representation	• Sampling of mainstream media content • Semi-structured interviews of activists and journalists	• Content analysis/Statistical Analysis • Discourse analysis • Thematic analysis
Reception	• Representative survey of the general population • Focus-group interviews of non-activist citizens • Semi-structured interviews of political elites	• Statistical analysis • Thematic analysis

The main challenge of such an ambitious methodological design lies in the need for ample resources and a variety of research skills in order to cover each moment in the circuit in a detailed and sophisticated manner, also making sure that the data gathered in the context of one moment feeds into the design of research tools of other moments, as well as building-in possibilities of validation at several moments in the design. For example, it makes sense to do additional interviews with activists at the end of the research cycle in order to share the data of the content

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1   I do not imply here that all these methods need to be used; choices can and probably should be made at each of the different moments.

analysis and the analysis of the survey and focus groups, as well as to validate the overall analysis of the nature of the mediation opportunity structure.

4.   Conclusion

The *circuit of protest,* as presented in this chapter, constitutes a productive conceptual and methodological framework to study a particular movement or even to compare movements. Besides providing an empirical model to study the various ways in which media and communication are relevant for activists and protest, the circuit enables us to bridge or, at the very least, address some important tensions within social movement as well as media and communication theory.

It enables us to think about the symbolic and material sides of a contentious struggle in conjunction with each other. It stresses the interplay between a set of processes that occur internally to a movement, but also accounts for the context outside of the movement. It also implicates the reception of movement discourses, frames and collective identities by non-activist citizens in the study of contentious politics. Furthermore, it positions a dialectic and productive articulation of power centrally at each of, and between, the different moments of the circuit. This avoids determinisms and leads, I suggest, to a more sophisticated and nuanced perspective on the nature of the success and failure of a movement and the struggle waged.

Mediation, as also discussed at length by Martín-Barbero (1993), is a very apt and productive theoretical concept to study contentious politics. Silverstone's double articulation of mediation allows bridging the symbolic aspects of political struggle with the materiality of communication technologies and self-mediation practices of activists. In terms of contentious politics, the concepts of alternative and mainstream media are highly relevant in equal measure, the former in view of the self-mediation practices of the movement; the latter in view of the circulation of its frames beyond the likeminded. This brings us again to the complex nature of reception and the notion of active audiences. Researching the reception of movement frames is worthwhile and a crucial component to understand and discuss the ambivalent nature of the circulation of protest. As Silverstone (2006: 42) put it, mediation is

> …not just a matter of what appears on the screen, but is actually constituted in the practices of those who produce the sounds and images, the narratives and the spectacles, as well as, crucially, those who receive them.

Finally, the circuit of protest is a holistic conceptual and methodological framework which enables the study of the production of movement discourses, frames and collective identities in conjunction with the self-mediation practices of activists, the way the mainstream media represents a struggle and the way these movement discourses, frames and identities circulate through society and are being picked up or indeed rejected by non-activist citizens. The circuit has already been tested to study the UK's anti-austerity protest (Cammaerts, 2018), where its usefulness has been demonstrated. Now it can, and should, be applied to a wide variety of social and political struggles, which will allow for the model to be improved and built upon. Be my guest!

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Biography

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