By the summer of 2008, it had become clear that a crisis in media was under way in Canada. The media giant Canwest was teetering on the edge of bankruptcy, local television stations were being closed, thousands of media workers had been laid off, and community radio and television were barely supported. At the same time, publics linked through social networks were producing and distributing a growing range of their own content through new media. Old media had collided with new technologies, national policies were facing global political and economic challenges, and the need to develop new approaches to media models had become urgent. Although these questions were being debated in some communities—among academics, labour unions, media producers and policy activists, for example—in various media, and at the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), we felt there was a pressing need to increase dialogue between and beyond these groups.

For all of these reasons, we organized the Making Media Public conference. Our aim was to bring people together to critically assess the current media situation, to envision ways of building sustainable media models that address the experiences of diverse Canadians, and to increase public contributions to and dialogue about policymaking. The conference, held at York University from May 6 to 8, 2010, was designed to enable sustained analysis of the current media crisis and to gain insight into the challenges and opportunities for transforming media in Canada. We were able to bring together a range of publics that does not usually have opportunities to gather for discussion: academic researchers, media workers, policymakers, union members, community members, alternative media producers, students, and media educators. As academics and graduate students who have actively participated in the production of alternative media and policy engagement, our aim was to dissolve the boundaries between academic researchers and those involved in media production and policy development, both large-scale and community-based. We hoped the conference would
help establish a forum for ongoing discussion and analysis so citizens are better equipped to understand and respond to rapid shifts in Canadian media.

**Continuing efforts in media reform**

Efforts to encourage the development of a media system that represents a broad range of ideas and perspectives have a long history in Canada. Since the Canadian Radio League’s battle to establish public broadcasting in the early 1930s, various citizens groups, labour organizations, academics, and others have continued to put pressure on governments and their agencies. Historically, however, such media activism in Canada has tended to be sporadic. Although a number of voices continue to call for change in the structure and operation of media in Canada, public pressure has been fragmented. For years, Friends of Canadian Broadcasting has been the only independent organization in Anglophone Canada actively engaged in issues of media regulation on a full-time basis. Although this organization sometimes comments on issues surrounding the press, its primary focus has been broadcasting. And although a number of groups and organizations have promoted reform of print, broadcast, and Web-based media in Canada, apart from unions and associations representing journalists, actors, and other media producers, efforts have been part-time and, generally, volunteer based.

Recent efforts to establish a broad-based coalition of media activists can perhaps be traced to 1995 and the establishment of the Canadian Campaign for Press and Broadcast Freedom (CCPBF), a national alliance comprised of the Council of Canadians, media unions, and other progressive groups. After the coalition’s unsuccessful court challenge against Conrad Black’s takeover of the Southam chain, however, a lack of resources kept the group’s activities to a minimum. In 1999, a local chapter of the alliance was established in Vancouver, in the words of Hackett and Carroll (2006, p. 177), “optimistically describing itself at the time as a common front of ‘readers and viewers, those working in media industries, and labour and community groups concerned about the increasing concentration of media ownership in Canada.’” This group went on to undertake a number of specific initiatives, including analyses of the editorial pages of local daily newspapers and a meeting with the B.C. Press Council, where the group urged the council to take a more independent stand from industry. After an attempt to mount a national conference was stymied by local labour leaders, the CCPBF followed the lead of a group of activists in Toronto and organized a local Media Democracy Day (MDD) in 2001. In the years following, MDD events have been organized in cities and towns across Canada and the United States as well as in Argentina, Brazil, Germany, Indonesia, Spain, and the United Kingdom. These events are designed to increase public awareness of media issues, publicize alternatives to mainstream media, and challenge the existing media system.

In May 2007, one of the founders of Media Democracy Day in Toronto, Paul Boin, combined his activist experience and his position as an assistant professor at the University of Windsor to organize a conference to recognize the 20th anniversary of the publication of Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky’s *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (1988). The event brought together activists, academics, students, journalists and other media practitioners, and a host of other participants.
from across Canada, the U.S., and the U.K. to discuss media issues. In the wake of those discussions, a subsequent session was dedicated to consider ways of further developing a media reform movement in Canada. Although no concrete plan of action was developed in that meeting, there was a consensus that an organization representing a diverse set of interests across a range of media issues was definitely needed. Rising to that challenge, a small group set about trying to develop such an organization.

The first iteration of these efforts was the Campaign for Democratic Media (CDM), headed by Steve Anderson, a graduate of Simon Fraser University’s Graduate Program in the School of Communication. Anderson was able to organize a loose coalition of a number of public interest and labour organizations and, over the next few years, the organization mounted several national campaigns around issues such as concentration of ownership, Net neutrality, and community media. It also took responsibility for Media Democracy Day (MDD) in Vancouver and used that as a base to provide resources for those in other locales wishing to mount an MDD of their own. In 2010, the name of the organization was changed to OpenMedia.ca, and today it counts organizations such as Canadian Internet Policy and Public Interest Clinic, the Council of Canadians, the Canadian Media Guild, rabble.ca, and Briarpatch magazine among its members. Many of the members of OpenMedia.ca participated in panels and roundtables at the Making Media Public conference.

While CDM was being organized, other groups were organizing as well. For instance, given the lack of larger infrastructural supports and the precarity of alternative media, a number of media outlets have been working to develop shared resources and to lobby government on policy issues of common concern. Groups representing both community radio and community television outlets have been pressing their concerns with the CRTC. Others, such as The Dominion News Cooperative, have been working to create autonomous media outlets. Meanwhile, media unions and other more traditional activist organizations have been experiencing severe job cutbacks and erosion of their membership.

This was the background against which Making Media Public (MMP) was organized.

Making a conference public
Our central aim for MMP was to invigorate activism, scholarship, and existing organizations by organizing a conference that reached a broad range of people interested in and working on media issues in Canada. We invited participation through a call for papers and presentations (CFP) disseminated through academic listservs and university departments as well as through activist channels and personal contacts to encourage participation from alternative, autonomous, and independent media communities. The CFP highlighted four prescient themes selected to frame discussions: policy, media labour, alternative and independent media, and history.

We received close to 50 submissions, which provided insight into the various currents of engagement with media in Canada. Rather than directly addressing practices of mainstream and corporate media, the majority of submissions focused on promoting and highlighting examples of independent and alternative media projects. This
demonstrates a vibrancy and diversity of alternative and independent media activism in Canada, yet also highlights less engagement at a policy or structural level. Responses to the CFP also demonstrated that funding and sustainability of independent and public media continues to be an important area of concern for expanded discussion and rethinking.

Based on the conference themes, the conference schedule was organized around roundtable discussions that tackled the challenges and opportunities facing the Canadian media system at this current juncture. The roundtable format enabled shared discussion that was carried into the topic-specific breakout panels (based on the submissions), which covered themes such as the changing role of public service media, social media, funding models, telecommunications and television policy, anti-racism and alternative media, hyper-local media, cultural production, media activism, and education.

Although we received a diversity of submissions, a number of topics were still left wanting. These included more in-depth discussions of media, race and gender experiences, and community and local media; therefore we actively sought greater participation for specific panels on these topics. The panels that emerged from these efforts were important and dynamic contributions in identifying the breadth and convergence of media issues. The focus on public media in particular allowed for important connections to be made between participants with different experiences, helping participants make more tangible links between local and community media and the national public broadcaster.

As policy was a central conference theme, we invited participation from the CRTC to give regulators an opportunity to engage in discussion and debate that rarely makes it into official hearings. Our invitation was declined, leaving an unfortunate gap in participation that would have been useful, given that discussions of policy issues and interventions emerged as one of the key areas for continued commitment and partnerships.

Challenges facing the Canadian media system
The opening panellists launched the conference by identifying a series of long-standing and emerging challenges, raising questions that were addressed in more detail throughout the weekend. An original member of the CCPBF, Robert Hackett, professor at Simon Fraser University, outlined several causes of the ongoing crises in media in general, and journalism specifically. These include increasing corporate control over communication resources and extensive media concentration as significant indicators of a dominant system intent on making media private. Hackett drew a direct link between corporate decision-making (aimed at mitigating large debt loads to acquire more media properties) and the decrease in local and community television. He also identified connections between changes in the Canadian media environment, including changes to the craft of journalism, audience fragmentation and a shift to reliance on the Internet as a dominant news source, ongoing newspaper closures, and a marked increase in the militarization of news media. While Hackett noted that corporate control of the media is an ongoing problem, he underscored that it is exacerbated by the federal Conservative government’s desire to allow increased foreign ownership of resources, particularly in media and communications, which is directly related to the decline of funding for public service media and community broadcasting. Considering
media in the future, Hackett also outlined new challenges that have arisen from digital media, such as overcoming a digital divide based on age, gender, and ethnicity; the pressing issue of network neutrality; and public access to the Internet. These challenges include a number of what he called “negative externalities”—both culturally and materially—as a digitalized and artificial environment facilitates a public disconnect with nature and the environmental hazards of cyber waste are ignored.

Leslie Regan Shade, professor at Concordia University, focused on the “vexed nature” of public interest research and public participation in government decision-making. She commented on the challenges in public participation in the policymaking process, which include the unequal structures of participation set up by the CRTC, based as it is on private media ownership, technical expertise, and dependence on personal time and financial resources. Shade underscored the challenge of coordination among an increasing range of civil society groups, coupled with a restrictive government grant system, limited public funding, and the significant time investment necessary for this work. Nevertheless, she argued that regulators need evidence-based research to inform and shape policy, and she urged those present—academics in particular—to make an increased contribution by providing research that is historical and quantifiable. This includes conducting qualitative interviews with a range of stakeholders and producing research in forms that policy analysts can understand and use. This theme of research and collaboration between academics and community groups, with the aim of transforming policy at the CRTC level, was carried throughout the conference.

Moving from the general to the particular, the panel shifted to the challenges facing media workers in Canada. Lise Lareau, president of the Canadian Media Guild, outlined the excessive number of layoffs in Canadian media over the past few years, including one day in October 2008 when Canwest laid off 560 workers (CBC News, 2008). Lareau argued that layoffs in the media industry have been three times that of the auto industry, which does not bode well for the future of the occupation or for students seeking a career in journalism. This also means that fewer workers are doing more work, which has negative implications for the quality of journalism. Media workers have less time for research, reporters are being taken off important beats such as legislatures, and less in-depth content is being reported. Lareau spoke about the fear within the ranks of both managers and workers due to intense and uncertain change. Speaking from his own experience in journalism, John McGrath, a former political affairs reporter for the CBC, supported Lareau’s insights with concrete examples from his long career. He spoke about the pressure public service reporters feel, especially in the era of convergence, when they are expected to file for both television and radio, with a lack of capacity to properly cover breaking stories or engage in the research necessary for in-depth reporting. He concluded by citing an internal survey conducted at the CBC that indicated low staff morale and declining quality of journalism (Friends of Canadian Broadcasting, 2010).

Other challenges raised throughout the weekend touched on developing new policies, addressing precarious and volunteer labour, increasing media and cultural funding, and making activist connections. Participants argued that there are many important decisions currently being made at the CRTC and in other government de-
partments that the general public tends to be unaware of, and there is an urgent need for citizens and community groups to engage and participate in the policymaking process. This includes conducting research to assist organizations in making arguments and submissions to the CRTC, and communicating the processes and outcomes of CRTC decisions more broadly to Canadians.

The challenges of labour were presented on two levels. The first was the need to improve working conditions for media workers, whether in public service media or in privately owned media, with particular attention paid to the growing pool of freelance journalists, who are experiencing precarious employment. The second focus of attention was the experiences of activists and alternative media workers, who struggle to sustain their work in the face of inadequate funding and a dominant system that rewards conformity and views activism as radical. Funding is a critical challenge for media and activism on all levels. Several participants voiced their frustrations with lack of funding and their consequent inability to support alternative media projects; to propose alternative funding models for mainstream media; to support media activism, community groups, and organizations; and to adequately prepare for and participate in policy interventions. It is an ongoing challenge to find financial contributions to support and sustain this work.

The funding challenge was felt directly in the organization of the conference. We spent much of the fall of 2009 drafting and submitting an application to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Research Workshops and Conferences in Canada Program for a grant to support the cost of the conference, but our application was unsuccessful. One notable reason for SSHRC’s refusal was that “the committee would have liked to see a stronger international presence amongst speakers” (SSHRC, personal communication to Patricia Mazepa, March 22, 2010). This comment came despite the fact that the conference was specifically focused on the crisis in Canadian media. SSHRC’s response also noted that “additional support from the host institution would have further strengthened the request”; even though the conference received funding from several university departments, this apparently was not enough (SSHRC, 2010). Without SSHRC funding we had to reassess the scope of the conference, and we were required to charge a higher conference fee that made it more difficult for some participants to attend, while others could not.

Although we did not receive SSHRC funding, the application process proved useful in helping plan the weekend events, outlining the conference themes, and inviting a broad selection of participants. Additionally, we sought out and received financial and in-kind assistance from other sponsors, such as the Canadian Media Guild and CWA/SAC Canada (Communication Workers of America), the Canadian Media Research Consortium and the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies, the Centre for Community Study, and several divisions within York and Ryerson universities, including, from York, the Faculty of Liberal Arts & Professional Studies, the Department of Communication Studies, the Joint Graduate Program in Communication & Culture, and from Ryerson, the CAW-Sam Gindin Chair in Social Justice and Democracy. Finally, we developed media sponsorship relationships with rabble.ca, the Real News Network and NOW magazine.
Certain additional challenges were raised by attendees, specifically about the conference and how it was organized, including who was present and who had the opportunity to make keynote presentations. It is important to acknowledge these concerns, as they reflect some of the larger issues facing a media reform movement in Canada. The first issue raised is that there needs to be a more diverse participation in this discussion, including those working on media issues from a range of racial, ethnic, and geographic locations, including Aboriginal peoples. Specifically, a major criticism was that there was underrepresentation of people of colour and that as a community we need to find a way to make events such as this conference more diverse and representative. In terms of geographic representation, there was recognition that all parts of Canada were not equally represented at the conference, including diverse linguistic groups. It was suggested that expanding the organization of this type of conference to other regions in the country would be a constructive way to address this situation and to bring more people into the organizing effort, avoiding individual challenges of burnout and time commitment.

A final challenge is the disconnection many individuals and groups feel while working on their projects. A palpable desire emerged among participants to build a larger, more integrated media reform movement in Canada, starting from the work already being done through groups such as OpenMedia.ca and the Canadian Association of Community Television Users and Stations (CACTUS), but extending to both grassroots activists such as the Media Co-op and to larger organizations such as labour unions. Many participants were introduced to each other for the first time at the conference and were appreciative that the conference provided space to meet and make initial connections.

Opportunities in making media public

As conference participants discussed the many crises facing media in Canada, several opportunities were also identified, which involved familiarizing participants with past practices, considering future possibilities, and generating ideas to make media (more) public. We have grouped these here according to developing opportunities in education, organization, coordination, and mobilization, while recognizing that these are not mutually exclusive.

Ongoing and future initiatives involving conference participants suggest a range of ways to facilitate public access to, and involvement in, media education. In addition to the support, production, and distribution of independent media such as rabble.ca, the Media Co-op, Shameless, and the Real News Network, these facilitation methods included contributions to the development of a public online archive of the history of alternative media in Canada (Alternative Archive, 2010); public outreach initiatives via free information sessions, workshops, and presentations on important issues such as global Internet governance (McGill University, 2010); and the development of media and policy literacy programming for public broadcasting such as the CBC or TV Ontario.

Extending the conference theme, media education includes the necessity to make policy public. Several presenters argued that education focused on media literacy (applied critical thinking to media content and its political and economic structures) is inseparable from policy literacy (understanding how policy is made, identifying how
to participate in and affect changes in CRTC consultations and government decision-making). It was thus suggested that there be more emphasis in university courses, institutions, and community organizing (for example, at community centres and libraries) to include information about access to the policy process and the necessity and urgency of engaging in media policy issues.

As already mentioned, a number of conference presenters were members of well-established organizations representing the many facets of media in Canada, and all expressed the need to make media production and activism more inclusive, collective, and better organized. This necessity was intended to apply equally to media labour and to the labour of activism. The intent is to challenge individualistic and fragmented models of freelance journalism, the tendency to identify media activism merely as volunteering, and the marginalization of groups accused of representing “special interests.” Opportunities currently exist to develop ongoing media activism at both the local or national level. These include further development of Media Democracy Day, contributions to the organization of community and campus radio and community television, participation in the continuing campaigns of OpenMedia.ca or the Canadian Internet Policy and Public Interest Clinic, the development of a strategy for public media sector or public service convergence, and building on labour convergence. (There was also heated debate among conference participants on the existence and possibility of soliciting aid from (scarce) Canadian philanthropic organizations as welcomed opportunity or, alternately, rife with political pitfalls.) Although there seems to be no shortage of media activist organizations working on various issues, the general consensus was that cooperation and coordination between them is limited, largely because of limits to activists’ time and energy. Coordination and improved communication between organizations was seen as a priority.

Drawing on historical examples and building on past organizational experiences, participants advanced several strategies for coordination. Foremost among these were suggestions for research collaboration, as there is a lack of comparative empirical research on Canadian media. For example, there were specific calls to identify and compare the links between media ownership concentration and Canadian content, changes in media labour (employment, production, digitization), and structural changes at the CBC, National Film Board, and provincial television. As communications policy lawyer Monica Auer underscored, the need for these comparisons is acute, as the CRTC has increased its reliance on corporate data, has withdrawn from collecting data itself, and, if it does collect data, does not make it public, so any evidence of the ramifications of government and corporate decision-making on the Canadian environment (holistically speaking) becomes increasingly invisible. Proposals for combining the resources of universities with the aforementioned organizations also include encouraging more sites for the public collection of data, such as reporting (www.openfile.ca) or monitoring Net neutrality and reporting on traffic shaping or bandwidth use (see, for example, www.herdict.org or http://ixmaps.ca).

The idea of research, media, and activist organization convergence was central in discussions of issue convergence (e.g., see www.tradejustice.ca), particularly as media and the communication environment as a whole is further digitized. A consensus model
proposed and applied at the University of Toronto is but one example of the possibility for developing public strategies both as record of and input to government decision-making. Including what it called the “desiderata for ICT in the public interest,” the recently published University of Toronto report argues for expanding the current government’s narrow focus on the digital economy to the digital society, one that prioritizes the public (in terms of full participation, access, and universality) in infrastructure planning, skills development, and decision-making (see Clement & Smith, 2010), and can be extended to developing a public media strategy. Conference participants are currently working on identifying what constitutes the Canadian version of a “progressive media network” (Clark & Van Slyke, 2009) and its “ecology of roles,” to identify the many constituents and layers of the network to better understand and facilitate its expansion.

To address the diversity of activism and differing positions on particular issues, this network needs to be both flexible and one of continuous mobilization. A social movement for public media—or what some participants called a movement for media reform, media justice, or media revolution—is one aimed at significantly changing the way media is understood, used, and developed in Canada (Carroll & Hackett, 2006). In addition to the education, organization, and coordination opportunities highlighted above, suggestions for directed mobilization included lobbying the federal government on laws governing charitable status for independent media, promoting public disclosure and changes to the mandate of the CRTC such that it is directly accountable to the public, and improving coordinated mobilization of online and independent media as well as unemployed and freelance journalists.

Many participants wanted to build on the momentum developed at the conference. Some suggested organizing a series of scheduled workshops involving the range of participants to address media and communication issues in Canada, to set out plans for research collaboration and working groups, media strategies, and policy input documents—in effect, to solidify and build on the already existing network by identifying tasks, setting timelines, and possibly meeting again for rethinking and renewal at a Making Media Public II conference. MMP participants have already expressed interest in collaborating on work around the future of over-the-air television transmission, the possibilities for community and local television, and future spectrum allocation, an effort being led by Karen Wirsig of the CMG and many participants from the conference, including Gregory Taylor, Steven James May, and Cathy Edwards of CACTUS.

In the meantime, we have established a listserv for conference participants and plan to update our website with material from the conference and updates about future plans (http://makingmediapublic.wordpress.com). Our hope is that the spirit generated by the Making Media Public conference, building on years of activism and media reform effort, will continue to develop.

Notes
1. See, for example, the Association for Media Literacy (www.aml.ca) and Media Action Média (www.media-action-media.com).

Websites

References