Partly due to citizens’ coalitions like the Canadian Radio League in the 1930s, Canadian communications policy has long embodied elements of a democratic public sphere (see, for example, Raboy & Shtern, 2010). While quite concrete social interests helped to solidify such policies as public broadcasting, the common-carrier principle in telecommunications, and public consultation processes in policymaking, Canadian communications policies are also informed by broader democratic values, such as accountability of media institutions to publics and democratic policy goals; access to, and diversity of, citizen-relevant information; community-building, at both local and national levels; minority cultural and linguistic rights; domestic control over Canada’s media system as a prerequisite for cultural sovereignty and democratic control over communication policy; and, yet more broadly, universal access to the key means of public communication as a basis for equality and participation in society, culture, and politics.

Never perfectly realized, these policies and values are under attack by neo-liberal governments and ideologues. Communication policy has never fundamentally altered the commercial and corporate domination of Canadian media, which has arguably intensified in recent years. Ownership concentration continues apace: mergers and acquisitions since 1998 have aggregated over half of all Canadian media revenues in the hands of three firms (Winseck, 2008), and the huge debts acquired during dot.com merger mania have contributed to a crisis of journalism. Regulatory and funding support for the CBC has been whittled down, its management and programming seemingly abandoning the philosophy of public broadcasting. Canadian ownership is being reconsidered by Stephen Harper’s federal Conservative government and has been eroded by regulatory decisions allowing increasing American minority ownership of Canadian media companies (Moll & Shade, 2008). Community broadcasting, formally

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one of three pillars of the broadcasting system, struggles along with minimal resources. Once again, impending federal copyright legislation threatens to restrict users’ rights of “fair dealing.” Digital divides still characterize the Internet, and there is little public policy to offset access inequalities ultimately generated by unregulated capitalism, or to support Canadian new media content. Escalating violations of the principle of “Net neutrality” threaten to create an increasingly tiered Internet, in which fast-lane access is confined to content providers who can afford extra fees.

If neo-liberalism succeeds in restructuring Canada’s media, progressive social change will be more difficult across the board.

Fortunately, civil society has generated a growing movement for change. In the U.S., groups working for media justice have flourished in marginalized communities. Hundreds of local and national groups working on independent media, media education, and policy advocacy have been joined by Free Press, a national flagship for media reform with hundreds of thousands of supporters. Canadians have started to follow suit. The veteran Friends of Canadian Broadcasting has been joined by other groups lobbying on telecommunications and copyright issues. Media workers’ unions have developed detailed policy proposals and launched collaborative policy-oriented campaigns. Activists and educators in Vancouver, Toronto, and elsewhere have organized an annual Media Democracy Day since 2001. In 2007, OpenMedia.ca (originally the Campaign for Democratic Media) was launched as a network of member organizations and individuals committed to expanding the public-interest voice in communications policy. Meanwhile, the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC), an ecumenical NGO concerned with communication rights for all, moved its global headquarters to Toronto.

In that context, and with key issues—Canada’s digital strategy, Net neutrality, community TV—currently on the policy agenda, OpenMedia.ca and WACC, in collaboration with communications scholar Robert Hackett, decided to research the potential for building media reform in Anglo-Canada. Funding was supplied by the Necessary Knowledge for a Democratic Public Sphere program of the Social Science Research Council, with support from the Ford Foundation. An online survey of 57 NGOs in different stakeholder sectors (political, professional/service, independent media, arts/culture, gender, religion, human rights, labour, First Nations, environment, et cetera) was supplemented by 18 in-person interviews (as well as a workshop with 19 media producers and communication rights advocates in Toronto in May 2009). Both online respondents and in-person interviewees were asked about the priorities, resources, strategies, challenges, partnerships, and achievements of each NGO, as well as use and perceptions of digital and news media. The objective was to identify opportunities and frames for successful media reform campaigns, projects, and partnerships.

Extrapolating from that research, this article considers the prospects for building a media reform movement in Canada. We draw selectively from social movement theory, particularly resource mobilization theory (RMT), to pose these questions: 1. Do issues of media access, content, or policy constitute a shared grievance for Canadian NGOs? Do NGO perceptions of media indicate potential incen-
tives to mobilize around communication issues? How do these issues relate to NGOs’ overall goals and priorities?

2. Apart from incentives, do NGOs have resources that could be mobilized in media policy campaigns?

3. Do NGOs have a shared diagnosis of media problems, one that could help to form a coherent common platform or collaborative campaigns? What would be the most politically effective frame—a broad “symbolic container” to give shared meaning to collective action (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993)?

4. To the extent that NGOs do have media-related grievances, diagnoses, and resources, are these translated into collaborative action? Does media activism constitute a nexus for progressive social movements, as argued by Hackett & Carroll (2006) and disputed by Napoli (2007)?

5. Beyond such short-term collaboration as may exist, is there consciousness of a shared identity as a movement for media reform?

**Media as shared grievance?**

Among the 57 online respondents, the importance of media was widely acknowledged: 84.6% agreed that the quality and diversity of Canadian journalism affects their work. This view was often combined with discontent regarding coverage of their own NGO and issues: 62% expressed dissatisfaction, and only 26% expressed satisfaction. There was some sentiment (44%) that CBC was better than other media; only 8% identified CBC as worse. Independent media also received a vote of confidence: 88% said that such media had been helpful to their work, although a minority noted limitations to alternative media’s resources, reach, and/or credibility.

Access to public communication is relevant to many of the priorities, achievements, and strategies of NGOs. The most frequently identified NGO priority for the near future was improving funding and sustainability, followed by advocating for changing government policy, improving benefits and representation of members’ interests, improving circulation of NGOs’ own media, strengthening the organization internally, improving the group’s public visibility, and educating the public on pertinent issues.

Conversely, the major perceived challenges are lack of funding or other resources, various changes in the media and communications environment, lack of influence with government, lack of visibility or public awareness, and poor media representation. All of these challenges loomed larger than hostile groups.

The NGOs’ dependence on mainstream media implies that they would benefit from democratic media reform. On the other hand, other factors militate against NGO investment of scarce resources in media reform. Some interviewees indicated that they had built positive relationships with at least some mainstream media, relationships they may be unwilling to jeopardize by overt advocacy of anti-corporate media reform. Several interviewees saw improved media relations practices by NGOs themselves as the best route to better coverage. Moreover, many NGOs have tried to reduce their dependency on mainstream media: the survey shows that NGOs put much more effort
into their own websites, blogs, or published reports than into news releases or other ways to attract traditional media. Not surprisingly, then, respondents were nearly unanimous (88%) that the Internet is very important to their work. All respondents agreed that Internet access for Canadians and for their own work is at least moderately important. They valued the Internet for very tangible and instrumental reasons: research, public access, mobilization, outreach, education, advocacy, collaboration, community-building, and networking. Many of the respondents were emphatic. “It is our oxygen,” said one.

Resources?
Compared with some of their U.S. counterparts, the NGOs that responded are mainly modest in size, though there is a wide distribution. The median category of membership size was 500-999. Seventeen of 57 NGOs had under 500 members; 14 are not membership-based. None had more than 100,000 signed-up members.

Median annual revenue was about $250,000. Thirteen had budgets of over $1 million, but fourteen had less than $100,000, including nine with under $25,000. We surmise that few organizations have surplus funds available for campaigns unrelated to their primary mandates, and some cannot afford paid staff at all. Lack of funding was the most frequently cited challenge facing the NGOs. Moreover, inequalities within the sector may well contribute to different organizational cultures and different levels of commitment to the existing field of state-recognized, politically legitimized advocacy.

That said, a cross-tabulation of organizational budget size with past and likely future participation in media/communication campaigns or coalitions revealed a striking contrast. Groups with budgets under $250,000 were much more likely to participate than their wealthier counterparts. Strategically, it would be important for a Canadian media reform coalition not to overlook the potential engagement of diverse small but dedicated organizations.

Asked to rate various sources of funding, respondents ranked the following as “very important”: government grants/contracts (40.0%), individual membership (35.2%), individual donations (34.7%), foundations/philanthropy (30.6%), grants/contracts from business (18.8%) or from unions (6.4%), products/services provided by the NGO for a fee (18.0%), and membership dues from affiliated organizations (11.5%). Evidently, government funding helps to sustain NGOs in Canada, with potential influence on NGO agendas. The pursuit of government funding may be part of the reason for the current apparent conservatism of the environmental movement. But it also gives these NGOs a vested interest in intervening in government policy. On the other hand, 36% said government funding was “not important” at all, once again suggesting a bifurcation between elite/state-oriented and oppositional/independent or small marginal groups.

Many organizations have succeeded in building a base of support from individuals. Support from foundations is important, but probably less so than in U.S. Overall, the importance of external sources other than products/services marketed by the NGO itself implies a high degree of financial vulnerability and a good deal of effort absorbed by fundraising, contract-chasing, and/or membership servicing.
A shared diagnostic frame?
Although the Harper government looms larger than mainstream media as a political opponent or problem for NGOs, they have at least modest incentives and resources for media policy campaigns. Do they share a perception of what policy solutions might improve the media?

On the abstract question of Canadian media’s performance of their role in a democratic society, over half of respondents (55%) rated it as poor or very poor, though 45.1% rated media as average or better. Most of the 24 respondents who offered additional comments were critical, in ways resonating with the potential agenda for media reform. First, 13 respondents pointed to aspects of corporate control, media concentration, and/or state policy. Ten mentioned biased or inadequate coverage. Some respondents linked bias to corporate control, but others emphasized resource constraints (the third most common theme of critics), cultural power differentials, or journalists’ own inadequacies.

These themes suggest somewhat divergent emphases for media reform: reduce market concentration; replace corporate ownership with public or community ownership; subsidize journalism; and/or change the cultural background and assumptions of journalists and their publics. These approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive, however. Possibly by contrast with their American counterparts, Canadian NGOs do not appear to put much faith in market forces and greater competition as an antidote to concentrated corporate control.

A parallel range of views is evident among the 39 respondents who addressed specifically how they would like to see the media changed. Their (multiple) responses can be categorized into the following themes: structural changes in media (18 respondents), better journalism and content (17), regulatory and financial support for independent and community media (11) or for public-service media (9), improved media personnel (2), other regulatory measures (2), and miscellaneous (4).

Encouragingly, there is widespread support for using the instrumentality of the state to achieve democratic reform of media. Perhaps not surprisingly from a sample of institutionalized advocacy groups, many of them seeking to influence government policy, there is little evidence of hardcore libertarian or anarchist/autonomist sentiment. To be sure, there are issues that are not unanimous (such as relative support for mainstream journalism, public-service media, and community media) or that could even be divisive for media reform coalitions, such as copyright (free access versus revenues for creators).

There is no such ambiguity around the issue of fair access to the Internet, however. Respondents expressed a commitment to its democratic importance, one commenting that the Internet is “now a crucial medium for communication; effective citizenship depends on access.” As noted above, however, NGOs’ self-interest is also at stake. A full 98% agreed that Net throttling, the practice of prioritizing Internet traffic according to ability to pay, would negatively affect their work, especially outreach and finances. Net neutrality, the non-discriminatory treatment of traffic, was described as essential, indeed “a life or death issue for us.”
Collaborative action?
The shortage of resources within individual NGOs reinforces the advisability of collaboration in mounting campaigns. Fortunately, the organizational culture in Canada seems favourable to coalitions. Asked how often their NGO engages in collaborative projects or campaigns with other organizations, only 13% of respondents said they “never” or “seldom” do so; 55.5% said they do so often or constantly.

Under what conditions might NGOs collaborate on campaigns related specifically to media issues? Our elementary data-analysis program enabled only limited bivariate analysis, but three correlations stand out. First, some NGO sectors are more likely than others to engage in media campaigns. One clue is provided by the sectoral response rate to our online survey. Of those invited to respond, peace and environmental groups were less likely to do so. With some notable exceptions (such as Adbusters magazine), groups in these sectors tend not to theorize the connection between dominant media and consumerism. Some NGOs in these sectors probably feel that they have won media access that they do not want to jeopardize through campaigns perceived as hostile to corporate media. A similarly low response rate from ethnic minorities may reflect a preference to work through their own media and communities.

By contrast, some of the “high” responders to the survey have a clear stake in communications policy: independent media, arts/culture, and arguably gender groups—in struggles for women's equality, in particular, media representations loom large. The welcome response from religious groups, perhaps encouraged by WACC's co-sponsorship of the project, suggests a media reform constituency often overlooked.

More direct evidence from the survey broadly corroborates the above ranking of sectoral participation. Civil and human rights groups, trade unions, media organizations, political advocates, and arts and culture groups were more likely than others to indicate past and likely future engagement with media policy campaigns.

A second variable influencing campaign/coalition participation is dissatisfaction with the mainstream media. Our sample was fairly evenly divided between participants and non-participants in media change campaigns. Respondents who had participated during the past five years were somewhat less satisfied with media coverage of their group and its issues or with Canadian media's democratic performance, compared with non-participants. There is a nearly linear relationship between dissatisfaction with media’s democratic performance and the likelihood of future participation in media reform campaigns. A small group of respondents ranked Canadian media as quite good, but nevertheless indicated interest in future campaigns, perhaps to defend valued services such as the CBC.

A third factor possibly influencing participation is perceptions of the Internet. While it is only a small sample, those who rated Internet access as less than “very important” to their work or to Canadians generally also rated their likelihood of joining a media reform campaign lower than did other respondents.

Regardless of the factors that catalyze it, does media activism perform the role of articulating a shared grievance for progressive social movements and providing an arena for them to come together, as Hackett & Carroll (2006) speculated? Or do other
organizations, such as trade unions or left-leaning political parties like the New Democratic Party, play that role in Canada?

Neither appears to be the case. Our respondents identified a total of 56 organizations as partners in the previous three years, but only three groups are mentioned more than once. The survey reveals no organizational hub for collaborative campaigns, although there may be passive partners, such as policy institutes, that consistently anchor campaigns with background advice or assistance.

Conclusion
The research summarized here is small in scale and thus must be considered exploratory. With that caveat, it does suggest that some of the building blocks identified by social movement theory are in place for media reform in Canada, such as shared dissatisfaction with the current state of Canadian media; a universal concern with and commitment to equitable and affordable Internet access; a tradition of engagement in collaborative campaigns; an expansive social movement and anti–neo-liberal orientation; a reasonable degree of awareness of media issues; previously untapped potential support among human rights, labour, and religious groups; and, arguably, an embryonic sense of media democratization as itself a social movement, especially among groups already in the independent media, culture, and arts fields.

Challenges remain, of course. Organizational resources are limited, even for NGOs’ primary goals. Corporate media do not loom as “the” enemy for progressive groups in Canada to the same extent as in the U.S. NGO prescriptions for media change do not converge on a single issue or solution, though such diversity is also a resource for building different coalitions on different issues. And finding widely resonant frames for the seemingly abstract issues of media democracy is a longstanding challenge (Ó Siochrú, 2005).

From the viewpoint of movement-building strategy, several implications follow. First, it may be advisable to adopt different frames for different issues and constituencies. Second, NGOs are most likely to invest resources in issues that affect their organizational mandates and sustainability. Third, “positive” frames, such as support for community media or for reinvigorating Canadian journalism, may find broader (albeit likely less intense) support than would adversarial frames, such as opposition to corporate concentration. Fourth, the issue of Internet access and Net neutrality is likely to find wide support and to provide an entrée to ongoing collaboration for future campaigns. Finally, as we argue in the full report (Hackett & Anderson, 2010b) and elsewhere (Hackett & Anderson, 2010a), the frame of “open media” could appeal to younger activists, and it complements a focus on equitable access to digital media. At the very least, it should take its place alongside other current frames reflecting different emphases, such as media justice, free press, media democratization, and communication rights (Hackett & Carroll, 2006).

Notes
1. A list of potential respondents to the online survey was compiled partly through personal contacts established by OpenMedia.ca, but mainly (in the apparent absence of an affordable and authoritative directory of Canadian organizations) through several online databases. For each organization, we sought to identify the individual responsible for media relations or policy development. Our list was
intended to include NGOs in each of the following 16 categories: peace, environment, ethnic, gender, religion, labour/trade union, independent media, technology, arts and culture, civil and human rights, First Nations, professional/service, general political and advocacy, foundations, charity/education, and research “think tanks.” (These categories can of course overlap. In analyzing the responses, respondents’ self-identification with a sector, rather than our own initial categorization, was employed.)

2. The following groups (usually through their president, co-ordinator, executive director, or media relations officer) were interviewed between January and May 2009: the Rideau Institute; Douglas-Coldwell Foundation; Council of Canadians, Consumers Council of Canada; Friends of Canadian Broadcasting; Canadian Association of University Teachers; Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television & Radio Artists; Canadian Conference of the Arts; Canadian Federation of Students; Columbia Institute; Check Your Head; The Tyee; W2 Community Media Arts Centre; Telecommunications Workers Union; The Maytree Foundation; NOW Magazine; Public Service Alliance of Canada; and Renewal.

3. We do not mean to imply that these questions are exhaustive; even within RMT, other questions are posed, such as the availability of political opportunities. Moreover, other traditions, such as new social movement theory, also offer valuable insights into media activism (see Carroll & Hackett (2006); Hackett & Carroll (2006)).

References


