

Global Greens and the Mass Media: Building for a Participatory Future?

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Abstract

Political parties gain their legitimacy through continuous public support, which is enhanced by their central presence in the public sphere. By contrast, particular political views that are regularly marginalised from the media (like environmental issues), weaken the credibility of the parties championing them (like the Greens). Some scholars suggest that the current commercial media system itself is one of the biggest barriers to the rising influence of civic service organisations – whose primary objectives are to create a more egalitarian and ecologically sustainable global economy.

The participatory and deliberative models of democracy favoured by the Greens rely heavily on a healthy public sphere for the maintenance of open information flows. Therefore, if society is to make the successful transition to a participatory democratic paradigm, the current media systems will have to change. An alternative media system should aim to catalyse and support the development of a more vibrant public sphere, placing a greater premium on public consensus making and deliberation. This change will require the reversal of current media and political trends, where increasingly political deliberation and participation are losing relevance within modern liberal democratic societies. Green Party documents often acknowledge the power of the media to undermine the expansion of participatory forms of democracy, and the question remains, on how such rhetoric translates into hard policy objectives? This paper sets out to

answer this question by analysing the contents of Green policy papers from a selection of countries around the world in order to determine their commitment concerning media reform.

Introduction

The mass media is an extremely valuable resource for all political actors who use it to obtain and maintain public legitimacy through their central presence in the public sphere (Meyer 2002, 71). By contrast, particular political views that are regularly marginalised from the media (like environmental issues), weaken the credibility of the parties championing them (like the Greens). Green politicians all over the world critique the current socio-economic and political environment, and acknowledge that more participatory (Pateman 1970) and deliberative (Habermas 1989) forms of democracy are necessary to maintain political (and corporate) accountability. These democratic ideals envisage a healthy public sphere with a democratically functioning media, enabling citizens to participate actively in their societies to determine their collective objectives. This participatory vision is a far cry from our current corporate dominated conservative media systems (Alterman 2003; Edwards & Cromwell 2006) which thrive within a neo-liberal environment that promotes deregulation and increasingly concentrated media ownership (McChesney 1999). Our media systems are becoming more *exclusive* not *inclusive*, promoting a phenomenon what Aeron Davis (2002) referred to as *Public Relations Democracy*, with the majority of the world's citizens excluded from elite policy discourses in private elite communication spheres and the mass media (Davis 2003, 684).

This has important implications for political groups who challenge the status quo in any country. Even the labour movement – the largest, most credentialed and well

resourced social organisation prior to the 1980s – has historically, been consistently treated with hostility by the media (e.g. in Britain see Philo & GUMG 1982); with the media consistently equating conservative values with common sense and identifying wage increases as the main cause of economic problems. Current research shows how the labour movement is still systematically misrepresented in the media despite its financial strength, application of professional public relations techniques and democratic ideals (e.g. Martin 2004). It is not surprising then, that Green electoral candidates and parties are regularly marginalised from the mainstream media – a process that is especially obvious during electoral campaigns. There has been some improvements in the media's coverage of Green issues in recent decades, but the question remains: how beneficial is this media coverage to the Greens' political agenda? Thus initially this paper will examine the Greens' relations with the mass media. This will then be followed by an exhaustive content analysis of Green party policy responses to media reform in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States, to determine whether their chosen policies are suitable for promoting a Green agenda and a participatory democracy.

Greening Media Coverage?

Media time is a scarce commodity for Green organisations, because no matter how professionalized their PR practices are they must still compete alongside other, better resourced corporate interests. This is especially true when genuine grassroots organisations find themselves competing alongside manufactured (media friendly) corporate social movements such as 'astroturf' groups (Beder 2000, 32). Even Greenpeace, a group well known for its positive media relations, despite years of campaigning was unable to easily bring the issue of genetic engineering onto the public

agenda for debate for a long time (Anderson 1993). Greenpeace activist Sue Mayer, recalled that the British media 'were extremely unwilling to look behind the hype of the companies and the hype of the scientists [regarding genetic engineering] until they were forced to' (Mayer quoted in Cromwell 2001, 81). Similarly, despite vibrant grassroots campaigns, the debate surrounding the rapid growth in the use of nanotechnology and bioengineering is all but excluded from the mass media (McIlwaine and Nguyen 2005; White 1998). Meanwhile, the media regularly discusses the merits of 'green consumerism', which like the corporate funded Wise-Use movement in the US (see www.sourcewatch.org) places the emphasis for environmental change on the individual rather than the producers (i.e. industry).

Ideological bias's like these mean that media organisations can cherry-pick the environmental causes/movements that best capitulate to their corporate driven demands for newsworthiness (for an extended discussion of this point see, Barker 2007). This encourages environmental movements to make concessions to their causes by becoming more 'media savvy' (Cracknell 1993, 19; Davis 2002, 181) and by internalising media (read: corporate) values to maximize their media coverage. Yet, even when compromises are made to obtain favourable media coverage, the ability of green groups to control how their stories are framed is questionable. For example, Greenpeace may have successfully drawn public attention to the problematic disposal of the Brent Spar in 1995, but according to Hansen (2000, 71) they were unable to bring the general thematic issues of oil rig decommissioning and marine pollution into the public sphere. Thus in the end such a media-centric approach only serves to fragment and isolate successful actions from one another, encouraging episodic rather than thematic media (Bennett 1988, 24).

Environmental movements may improve their media visibility, but paradoxically by making tactical concessions to obtain media coverage, they may render their longer-term objectives invisible to their audience. Draper (1987) notes that:

The tradeoff between 'mediagenic' short-term actions and long-term movement-building does not have to be so direct – one can complement the other. But the role of the press with its insatiable appetite for colour does often dictate the way environmentalists plan their campaigns. As we compete with football teams for public attention, however, we have to be certain that we are not just helping create a mass audience of spectators. (Draper 1987)

Here lies a dilemma: environmental movements may begin to define their success by their ability to gain media coverage, not by the number of citizens they mobilize, or the number of policy decisions they influence.

Interestingly, despite the rising power of the environmental movement and increasing public awareness of environmental issues, this has not necessarily equated with improved media coverage. In fact, a comparison of environmental pollution coverage between 1972 and 2000 in US newspapers found that the nature of the coverage was unchanging (Kenix 2005). Thus campaigning around the issue of pollution has had almost no effect on the mass media's discourse and if anything, the media framed the issue to oppose the environmental movement's objectives. For example, even though 73% of the articles identified industry as the cause of pollution, it was the government who were most often framed (in 78% of articles) as the body responsible for dealing with the pollution. Framing like this leaves citizens with little sense of personal urgency to combat environmental pollution, as it appears that the government can be left to organize things. Similar framing was evident in the media coverage of environmental stories in Australia (Jenkin 1998) and Canada (Karlberg 1997). The American study also

showed that 90% of the articles failed to mention the presence of local environmental organisations working to combat pollution and 83% omitted any mention of national environmental groups (Kensicki 2001, 208). Furthermore, the term environmentalist and activist were used in only 15% and 2% of articles respectively. With no mention of the pivotal role social movements play in encouraging governments to hold corporations accountable, it is likely that readers will be left confused about how to affect change, and may even be left with the impression that ‘an essentially benign’ government is adequately dealing with environmental pollution. Neither of these results are very useful to social movements trying to bring about change. Environmental reporting in Canada seems to suffer from similar deficiencies and Babe’s (2005) study of the *Globe and Mail* – ‘arguably the premier Canadian print journal’ (2005, 188) – concluded:

...that while ‘lip-service’ was paid to environmental concerns, those issues were never addressed in their full range and seriousness; the lip-service, we might speculate, served to divert attention from the overall thrust of the reporting, which was one-sided and hardly environmental. (Babe 2005, 219)

Examination of the climate change debate in the British press suggests that similar problems plague its coverage. At the start of 2005, an international task force on climate change concluded that we could reach ‘the point of no return’ in as little as a decade (Lean 2005) and a strong consensus has been reached in the scientific community that climate change is a real and dangerous issue, but where are the calls to organize and support grassroots organisations campaigning to deal with it? Carvalho and Burgess (2005, 1467) studied the discourse of climate change in the British quality media (*The Guardian*, *The Times*, and *The Independent*) from 1985 to 2003 and concluded that “[d]angerous” climate change is... both politically defined and ideologically constrained’ and what many non-governmental organisations consider to be the root cause of climate

change, 'unlimited consumption and continuous economic growth have typically been left unchallenged by all' (Carvalho 2005, 20). Smith (2000, 3) also observes how '[t]he public's understanding of global environmental change and sustainability issues has been badly served by the media. As the Science of climate change and biodiversity has matured, media coverage of these issues has, perversely, reduced.'

In Australia, Hollander's (2005) study of print media coverage of logging issues (in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Financial Review*) – over three time periods from the late 1980s to 2004 – showed how environmental voices have become increasingly marginalised in the news (a general observation shared by Hutchins & Lester 2006). Despite conservation organisations acting as the dominant news source in the beginning of the study (with industry occupying a reactive role), their positions had reversed by the mid 1990s. Hollander determined that the change in coverage was in part due to the government's framing of the stories, which drew upon decreasing levels of 'official' conflict over time: from the intergovernmental conflict (1986-87), to intragovernmental disputes (1995-96), to an almost consensus position between the two main parties, who both agreed on the need for sustainable management, but not conservation (2004 election). These results suggest that the media's role in framing logging issues could be described as 'indexing' (Bennett 1990) or 'manufacturing consent' (Herman & Chomsky 1988) – although Hollander herself did not forward such a radical interpretation of her data – because the coverage implicitly accepted the frames (or issue boundaries) set by elite interests.

Other research investigating news coverage of environmental issues in the UK (focusing on the liberal media, the *BBC*, *The Independent* and *The Guardian* – McKiggan 2005), in Australia and the US (analysing coverage in *The Australian* and the *New York Times* – Linder 1994), and in Canada (in the *Globe and Mail* – Babe 2005)

also conclude that the media coverage was consistent with the findings predicted by Herman & Chomsky's (1988) Propaganda Model. Gaber's (2000) study of environmental coverage in the British press between 1985 and 1999 might also be interpreted in a similar way. He noted that following a key environmental speech made by Prime Minister Thatcher in September 1988 – which he described as the Conservatives attempt to reclaim green issues from the increasingly influential Green party – there was a dramatic increase in environmental coverage. One year later, when both major political parties stopped 'talking' about the environment, media coverage dropped sharply, as did the number of environmental journalists employed in the British media (Gaber 2000, 119). In 1998, the newly elected Labour government 'made the environment one of the major themes of its 1998 presidency of the European Commission' which led to a level of media interest in environmental issues similar to that seen ten years earlier 'when Mrs Thatcher first "discovered" the issue' (Gaber 2000, 122-123).

This all seems to bode poorly for the sustainability of a vibrant participatory environmental discourse in the mass media and for Green party activism more generally. If the media encourages apathy through the use of 'neutral frames,' non-coverage, episodic (instead of thematic) coverage, or over-coverage with limited solutions (Bennett 1988, 24; Kensicki 2001, 279-80), Green parties need to consider how beneficial it is to seek such disempowering media coverage. Gitlin (1980, 287) notes that for reformist groups to maintain any semblance of positive media coverage, they have to partake in an ongoing fight to shape the daily news to prevent their messages being rendered unintelligible. This point is echoed by Cracknell (1993, 14), who suggests that 'getting coverage is only half the battle, getting the coverage to say what you want it to is another battle altogether.' It seems that most people are aware that numerous serious environmental problems are challenging human existence, but if they continue to learn

about these issues in an episodic manner that leaves them feeling helpless (or disempowered, see Iyengar 1991), where the only consistent solution offered by the media is changing their personal consumption patterns, can Green parties really expect the media to help them build a mass movement for global justice (or even just get elected)?

Participatory Democracy and the Mass Media

Habermas's (1989) call for a deliberative democracy envisaged citizens in continuous, rational, consensus seeking deliberation about their own governance and he suggested that the media and the associated processes of forming political opinions should lie at the heart of a healthy democracy. He was especially critical of the way the public sphere was being distorted by powerful interests and saw its reform as critical to the process of establishing a deliberative democracy. Although Pateman's (1970) classic description of a participative democracy did not specifically address the media, she still emphasized the importance of maintaining fluid and open information flows, and so it seems clear that the media would play a vital role in any participatory democracy. All of the Green parties examined in this study were unanimous in their desire to create a more deliberative and participatory democracy (also referred to as grassroots or direct democracy). So what role do these parties envisage the media playing in their attempts to fulfil this objective? The US Green Party (2004, 37) critiques the lack of 'a wide variety of opinions and information' in the corporate media and explains how it will 'improve the role [the] mass media plays in political and daily life by encouraging the diversification of programming and news coverage, and [by] increasing access to the mass media.' Similarly, the Australian Greens acknowledge the power of the media to undermine the 'expansion of [participatory] democracy' (WA Greens 2005). On the other hand, other

parties like the Green Party of Canada and the Scottish Green Party don't even mention the word 'media' in their policy manifestoes. That said, these two groups' policies seem out of place as the Charter of the Global Greens (2001, 4) notes that participatory democracy requires 'individual empowerment through access to all the relevant information required for any decision' and affirms that the media (along with culture, basic access to food, social and public health, education) should not be treated as a "commoditi[y]"...subjected to international market agreements' (Ibid, 11).

Green Party Media Policies

Although there is some agreement among the Greens globally that our current media systems are not really compatible with participatory outcomes for the public, there is a wide range of variation in the urgency attached to the issue of media reform. Therefore, this section will review each Green party media policies, moving from those countries with the most comprehensive media reform policies to those with the least.

United States

The US Green Party is highly committed to media reform, with 13 policy recommendations devoted to 'Free Speech and Media Reform' (Green Party of the United States 2004, 37). Furthermore, it is dedicated to serious structural reform of media systems. One of its primary aims is to return 'ownership and control of the electromagnetic spectrum to the public' replacing free licenses with '[m]arket-priced leasing of any for-profit use'. (Here it is important to note that the US Green Party considers the electromagnetic spectrum to be one of the 'most important taxpayer assets'.) The US Greens aim to establish new taxes on electronic advertising sales will

enable them to fund the creation of more democratic media outlets. It recognises that the corporate media's provision of 'a steady stream of increasingly coarse, redundant, superficial programming' has 'caused serious deformations of our politics and culture' providing a popular culture which 'is crassly manipulated by the profit motives of increasingly concentrated media conglomerates' (Ibid, 17). The US Greens also acknowledge the need for 'a wide span of programming and information, genuine citizen access, diversity of views, respect for local community interests, news, public affairs and quality children's programming.' So they promote policies that will attempt to reverse antidemocratic media trends by repealing the 1996 Telecommunications Act (for the importance of this act see, McChesney 2004), restricting media consolidation, ending commercial advertising in public places (like schools), opposing censorship, and limiting the concentration of ownership in the telecommunications industry.

On the proactive side, the US Greens aim to: ensure full public funding to the National Public Broadcasting System, focus on developing small, locally-owned FM community radio stations, provide free and equal radio and television time and print press coverage for political candidates at the state and federal level, and ensure that broadband internet access becomes a taxpayer-funded utility to help end the 'digital divide' (Ibid, 68). It also aims to make sure that the Federal Communications Commission is held accountable and does its job properly and that there is '[c]ommunity ownership of broadcast outlets and public oversight of licensing.' Under the 'Civil Rights and Equal Rights' section of their policy platform the US Greens also identify the need to minimise the stereotyping of the mentally and physically challenged in all media, and the need to safeguard youth rights – which will be met in part, by providing them with the opportunity to express themselves in the media (Ibid, 22-23). 'Youth rights' policies also

highlight the necessity of providing adequate media education to children, which will include training in the analysis of the commercial media.

Australia

The Australian Greens' policy statement gives some consideration to the influence of the mass media on society, but seems content to leave discussion of the corporate media well alone, as the two main media policies are limited to strengthening public broadcasting (Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)). The first policy aims to ensure that public broadcasting is 'adequately funded and able to entertain, inform and educate the Australian people free from political and corporate manipulation', and the second, is to 'ensure that the ABC is funded to broadcast at a standard of excellence throughout Australia and overseas' (Australian Greens 2005, 153). Short-term targets elaborate on these policies by adding that it intends to 'support community radio and TV stations' and regulate commercial media stations to ensure that they 'increase their Australian content and target specific groups, including young, older and Indigenous Australians in discussion of their work.' To support these initiatives it aims to 're-write [broadcasting] guidelines to ensure increased local content' in all media productions (Ibid, 155).

Some of the Australian Greens' other general policies hint at their understanding of the need to counter some of the anti-democratic trends of the mass media (Barker 2005; Berry & Theobald 2006), as it aims to: 'restrict the advertising and promotion of brand name pharmaceuticals to doctors and the public through all media' (Australian Greens 2005, 141); strengthen regulations to limit the use of advertising 'which includes violence against and sexual exploitation of women and children' – creating an educational program to examine how similar forms of exploitation are used in the media

and entertainment industry, remove 'tax incentives for hard-core pornographic films' (Ibid, 65), and 'support enhanced anti-monopoly laws...to stop companies... from gaining domination in the Australian market, as is the case at present in the media industry' (Ibid, 93). This last point is important, as despite its recognition of the limited ownership of Australian media systems, the Australian Greens have no policies that explicitly address how such problems in the corporate media may be overcome. Neither does it acknowledge the negative influence that the corporate media exerts on both public broadcasting standards and the entire public sphere (McChesney 1999).

Canada

The Green Party of Canada's electoral platform document stresses how '[a]t every level, arts and culture help define our identities and communities' (Green Party of Canada 2006, 20), yet no mention is made of the negative impact of the corporate media on the public's understanding of Green issues (Babe 2005). In fact, its policy document does not even include the word 'media.' There is one media related policy though, which outlines its commitment to '[p]rovide stable base-funding for the CBC [the public broadcaster] to provide quality television and radio programming in both official languages' (Ibid, 20).

United Kingdom

In contrast to the other aforementioned Green parties, the Green Party of England and Wales have no specific media policies. However, its mental health policies recognize the need to 'legislate to prevent the "demonisation" of clients of the mental health services in particular by the media' (H318). Likewise, its Northern Ireland policies highlight the need

for a repeal of broadcasting bans which have been ‘imposed on particular organisations’ and the ‘provision of accurate information through the media’ to facilitate improved public debate about Northern Ireland (NI321). These two policy recommendations show, that it is aware that the media are not performing their democratic role perfectly, but rather than tackle the root cause of the problems (which appears to be their aim with nearly every other issue) it seems content to merely tinker around the edges of the media reform debate. This is reflected in some of its other policies, which suggest that poor public understanding of some issues can simply be overcome by more vigorous ‘national publicity campaigns,’ covering certain issues such as climate change (CC233), the oppression of disabled people (DY401), and the need to eat healthily (FD100). Fortunately, its omission of media policies may be rectified in the near future, as the issue of media reform will be considered at its next annual conference in April 2006. Hopefully, such discussions will also proceed at the next conference for the Scottish Green Party, as its policies regarding the mass media are even weaker than those of the Green Party of England and Wales. The word ‘media’ does not make it into its election manifesto and the only media related policy relates to the removal of fast food advertising from children’s television (Scottish Green Party 2005, 6).

Discussion and Conclusion

When particular political views are regularly marginalised from the media (like environmental ones), the credibility of the parties championing those issues will be weakened. If any given society is to make the successful transition to a participatory democratic paradigm, it seems likely that the media will have to support the development of a more vibrant public sphere, which places a greater premium on public consensus making and deliberation. Curran (1991, 103) envisages a media which can ‘facilitat[e]

democratic procedures for resolving conflict and defin[e] collectively agreed aims.’ This will require the reversal of current media and democratic trends, where increasingly ‘political deliberation and participation are losing relevance’ within modern liberal democratic societies (Meyer 2002, 117).

It is also clear that the type of progressive and participatory media system that might be utilised to facilitate this paradigm shift needs to be open to public discussion. Therefore, in order to avoid the processes of consensus forming overruling dissent ‘direct democracy has to emphasize the media’s discursive role, with the state being expected to enable, via subsidy and a regulatory framework, the emergence of relatively autonomous media’ (Street 2001, 267). In this way, no ideas should be suppressed and the public should debate the virtue of a plurality of ideas through an ongoing process of deliberation and dialogue in the public sphere.

Although Green politicians stand to benefit the most from a more participatory media, it seems that they are often reluctant to challenge the influence of those media institutions with the most political power, the corporate media. Only the US Greens have committed to challenging the anti-democratic tendencies of the corporate media, while the others opt for strengthening public broadcasting media (Australian and Canada), or make no commitments to media reform at all (England and Wales, and Scotland). Perhaps as media analyst David Edwards notes:

...Greens are so accustomed to minimal or zero coverage that they are pitifully grateful to receive any media coverage at all. They fail to recognise that, despite decades of ‘playing the game’, they are systematically ridiculed, marginalised and ignored by the media. (Edwards & Cromwell 2005).

Spencer Fitzgibbon, press officer for the Green party in England and Wales gives an alternative explanation for this attitude, noting that despite all the mainstream media problems ‘we simply must work with it, or be invisible, which would mean utterly failing to ever have a chance of implementing the policies we believe in’ (Quoted in Edwards and Cromwell 2005). This may be the case, but what if the media needs to be reformed (as argued in Barker 2007) before society can make any substantial progress towards approaching a participatory state?

Development of new media technologies (like the internet) may hold some hope for the development of an alternative public sphere based on more participatory principles, but many researchers suggest that this is unlikely, especially without a vibrant ongoing public debate on the subject – which has not been forthcoming to date (e.g. Barker 2005; Dahlberg 2005, 160; Mansell 2004, 102; McChesney 2004, 210-217). Furthermore, democracy will always need professional journalists to function effectively and their services to society can never be fully replicated by the internet’s public service journalism. Independent journalists may be able to provide brilliant and diverse analyses of various issues (e.g. www.zmag.org) but without the resources, institutional support, protection and legitimacy that professional journalists have, they will always find it hard to adequately challenge government and corporations successfully (McChesney 1999, 176). Fulltime paid journalists have access to power for interviews and the time and resources to conduct long term investigations, all of which are needed for meaningful research. Participatory democracies will need more waged journalists, as citizens will need regular and comprehensive news coverage on all aspects of their society’s management, from the local to the global. Therefore, it is evident that Green parties will need to seriously consider how they may be able to reform (or change) the dominant

media systems that the majority of the world's populous relies upon, so it is able to support their demands for a participatory democracy.

At the moment, one of the fundamental roles of the media in liberal democracies is to critically scrutinise governmental affairs: to act as the 'Fourth Estate' of government. Another potential role for the media in a participatory democracy would see it acting as a 'corporate watchdog.' If the media could be reformed (or even small parts improved) so that it could begin to take on this role, this would greatly improve the bargaining power of citizens in political processes and greatly improve the prospect of the creation of more participatory and Green forms of governance.

Much needs to be done, but a start can be made right now through raising public awareness. This is crucial, because the democratic quality of media systems is largely determined by the quality of the 'communicative culture that surrounds the media, particularly the efforts of societal actors to enforce high standards' (Meyer 2002, 139). This brings us back to the Green policy manifestos outlined in this study and the urgent need for them to (all) acknowledge the significant interests the corporate media have in maintaining the status quo and opposing the Greens proposed transition to a more participatory paradigm. For a start, it would be a positive development if all the Green parties worked to kick-start a public debate around the issue of media reform by outlining policy prescriptions that begin to challenge the dominance of corporate media outlets in the public sphere. More Green parties need to emulate the US Greens and at the very least, initiate a public conversation about the need for more progressive media education in schools. This would help both children and adults to critically engage with media institutions and create a 'communicative culture' around the media which would serve to strengthen its commitment to all democratic principles (representative and participatory alike).

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