

# Media, communication, and intersectional analysis: ten comments for the International Panel on Social Progress

Global Media and Communication

1–9

© The Author(s) 2018

Reprints and permissions:

[sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav](http://sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav)

DOI: 10.1177/1742766518776695

[journals.sagepub.com/home/gmc](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/gmc)**Sasha Costanza-Chock** 

Massachusetts Institute of Technology, USA

## Abstract

This article responds to the International Panel on Social Progress (IPSP) chapter ‘Media, Communication, and the Struggle for Social Progress.’ I argue that in order to advance the IPSP’s goals of progress towards a media system that advances human capabilities, we must name specific forms of structural oppression (what Black feminist scholars call the *matrix of domination*). I note that the IPSP should develop an intersectional analysis of media representation, employment, and ownership; that online hate speech must be addressed; and that the ‘filter bubble’ critique ignores the importance of subaltern counterpublics, although state and corporate propaganda is indeed a real problem. I urge application of a design justice lens, and identify free software as one important tool. I call attention to media policy proposals by social movements. Finally, I note the development of new tools for media analysis and encourage their application to an intersectional Media Equity Index.

## Keywords

Design justice, International Panel on Social Progress, intersectional media analysis, media equity index, media justice

## Introduction

We live in a chaotic time of media manipulation, resurgent authoritarianism, and the general collapse of public trust in nearly all institutions, including the media. In this moment, it is incredibly important for scholars to engage with core questions about how and whether our planetary media and communications system might be transformed into

---

### Corresponding author:

Sasha Costanza-Chock, Department of Comparative Media Studies/Writing, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, E15-322, Cambridge, MA 02139, USA.

Email: [schock@mit.edu](mailto:schock@mit.edu)

one that supports human capabilities and ecological sustainability. The International Panel on Social Progress (IPSP) has attempted to do just that in the text 'Media, Communication, and the Struggle for Social Progress.' In the summer of 2017, I had the honour and pleasure of presenting two formal responses to this text, first at a panel at the International Communications Association (ICA) meeting in San Diego, and then in a plenary session at the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) in Cartagena, Colombia. In this article, I present a synthesis of my comments from both venues, with additional thoughts and references. Overall, the authors have done an excellent job with the daunting task of summarizing the general state of scholarly knowledge about the global media system. Rather than reiterate the key findings of the IPSP, which are in any case also available in this journal, I will move directly to questions, critiques and suggestions.

### **Name the matrix of domination, and rethink our indices of progress through the lens of intersectionality**

First, at a moment of ascendant nationalism, unapologetic White supremacist heteropatriarchy, and xenophobia, it is more important than ever to be explicit about the values that guide us and the systems of oppression that we seek to transform. I understand the authors' need to be strategic and to couch messages in audience-appropriate language. At the same time, if the aim of the IPSP is to restore our faith in the possibility of social progress, it troubles me to avoid naming the structures that stand in the way. Why not describe, specify, and name the constituent elements of what Patricia Hill Collins (2002) calls the matrix of domination: White supremacy and systems of racial and caste control, heteropatriarchy and gendered inequality, capitalism, settler colonialism and the ongoing erasure of indigenous peoples, ableism, and so on? Naming enables us to better analyse the ways in which our media and communication system both reproduces and is reproduced by the matrix of domination, as well as the ways in which social movement actors use media to challenge, dismantle, and transform oppression.

Grappling with the relationship between the media system and the matrix of domination requires us to engage with Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1991) concept of intersectionality. Intersectionality describes the ways in which our life chances are shaped by our particular location within intersecting fields of race, class, and gender. This concept calls attention to the fact that these axes of identity cannot be separated from one another: for example, I experience life as a White trans person, and my experience and life chances would be very different if I were a Latinx trans person. This includes my experience of the media and communications system.

Concretely, intersectional analysis is crucial to any attempt to establish meaningful indicators of progress. For example, if we are interested in progress towards more diverse and inclusive newsrooms, but we only track gender of newsroom employees without also tracking race, we might (hypothetically) observe a statistical advance towards gender parity and thereby decide that social progress has been made. However, if we look more closely at the numbers and disaggregate them by race, we might find that a slight increase in hires of White women journalists comes at the same time as a wave of firing of men of colour. Presumably, we would then have a less optimistic analysis of whether these

changes in employment statistics indicated social progress. The point is that intersectionality is not just an important abstract concept. It has very real implications for how we conceive and measure meaningful social progress, including in our media and communication system.

## Representation still matters

Next, representation in mass media, including both in journalism and entertainment media as well as in social media, still matters a great deal. In too many media platforms, marginalized communities remain invisibilized, subject to what George Gerbner called *symbolic annihilation* (Gerbner and Gross, 1976). In other cases, for example in the representation of women and/or of Black people, there is a crisis of over- or misrepresentation. Patricia Hill Collins (2002) talks about this in terms of the *controlling images* that negatively depict Black women. Herman Gray (1995) discusses this dynamic in terms of hypervisibility, hypersexualization, and the reproduction of anti-Blackness, as well as misogyny. Moya Bailey (2013) describes how Black women are misrepresented in the media system in ways that reproduce what she calls *misogynoir*, or the specific hatred of Black women and Black femmes. In another example, transgender people and people of third genders have always existed, but, in many places, for hundreds of years, suffered erasure and invisibility under the hegemony of European settler colonial systems (Driskill, 2011). Recently, trans people have become more visible across the media ecology, and can therefore be said to be advancing in the struggle against symbolic annihilation, even as we are increasingly incorporated into commodity culture (David, 2017). At the same time, transphobic violence has escalated to historic highs in countries across the Americas, including Brazil, Mexico, and the United States (Waters and Yacka-Bible, 2017). Gossett et al. (2017) call this double development the ‘trap door’ of trans cultural visibility.

In brief, representation still matters. Therefore, the media and communication indicators in the proposed Social Progress Index (SPI) should include measures of representational inequality such as those developed and regularly updated by projects like the Global Media Monitoring Project (<http://whomakesthenews.org>), the International Women’s Media Foundation Global Report on the Status of Women in the News Media (<http://www.iwmf.org/our-research/global-report>), the Byline report, and the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film at San Diego State University (<http://womentvfilm.sdsu.edu>), among others.

## Employment and ownership are important

We need to track data about questions such as: who gets paid to do media and communication labour, who sits in positions of authorial and editorial power, and who sits on the boards of old and new media companies? For example, in the United States, long-term data on employment in the media industries, such as studies of newsroom gender and racial diversity by the American Society of Newspaper Editors, the Radio Television News Directors Association, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and the US Economic Census all reveal persistent long-term ownership and employment inequality (Wilson et al., 2016). Not only do employment and ownership in media industries fail to

reflect gender or racial diversity (let alone intersectional inclusion), but the data show media companies backsliding away from demographic parity as newsrooms shrink. Even in sectors such as digital-only newsrooms that show slightly better diversity figures, at the current rate of change, the media industries will never reach parity with the overall population in terms of employment and ownership (Wilson et al., 2016).

## **Online hate speech and trolling**

Despite a surge of both popular and scholarly analysis of the phenomenon, hate speech is not discussed much in the chapter. In particular, the IPSP should engage with the surge of racism and misogyny online, as well as with new knowledge about the widespread targeting of activists by counter-movements, national governments, and corporate information war contractors (Massanari, 2017; Treré, 2016). In the chapter, the term misogyny appears only once; the term racism is not found; homophobia and transphobia are absent from the analysis. There is, however, a commendable engagement with insights from disability studies about accessibility, representation, technology design and affordances, and more (see Mingus, 2010).

The IPSP, and media scholarship in general, needs more sustained attention to the ways in which hate speech, trolling, doxxing, distributed denial of service attacks (dDOS), and other forms of online attack are a constant and growing presence that reinforces intersectional structural inequalities and further oppresses already marginalized peoples. Analysis of threat levels, and discussion of responses to these challenges, need to be incorporated into the Action Plan and Toolkit. For example, there are feminist proposals for steps social media platforms can take to mitigate misogynist trolls; we might include ongoing study or review of the most popular social media platforms in each region and whether they have incorporated these proposals.

## **Filter bubbles, propaganda, and ‘fake news’**

I also think we need to open a much sharper critique of the liberal democratic rhetoric that positions the ‘filter bubble’ as the key challenge for networked publics (Pariser, 2011). Put simply, the idea is as follows: social media has enabled us all to avoid engaging with the perspectives of people who don’t think like us, both because we self-select who we friend and follow, and also because the sophisticated algorithms that social network sites use to generate our feeds learn from our click habits over time. In multiple ways, then, we all end up constantly exposed to information, news, and views that support and confirm things we already believe. We start to believe that the entire world thinks like us. We end up neither challenged to expand our own thinking, nor even aware of the range of debate. Also, we fail to gain a sense of the conversation that’s happening outside of our own circles.

These are indeed real problems that must be addressed. However, there are several problems with this framing: it ignores the importance of subaltern counterpublics for a healthy public sphere, creates a false equivalency between all groups regardless of power, and fails to understand the notion of double consciousness, whereby groups in subordinate positions are already forced to learn about the ideas of the dominant group

in order to survive. Focus on the filter bubble as a frame for ‘what’s broken’ and what ‘needs to be fixed’ typically comes from a place of great privilege. The critique of this stance is perhaps best summed up by the ‘Oh My God, I Think America is Racist!’ Saturday Night Live election party skit with Dave Chappelle and Chris Rock (see <http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/snl-election-night-watch-party-oh-my-god-i-think-america-is-racist/article/2607259>).

In other words, the filter bubble critique of the media system is based on an uncomplicated reading of Habermasian public sphere theory that ignores decades of work by feminist and antiracist public sphere theorists like Nancy Fraser (1990), Catherine Squires (2002), and many, many others. We know that subaltern counterpublics are crucial to the formation, articulation, rehearsal, and advance of social movements and systematically marginalized identities, yet the conversation constantly collapses into assumptions and framings about fragmented networked public spheres as automatically bad for (neo)liberal democracy. Media scholars must do better.

That said, there is indeed a real problem with right-wing propaganda that is flooding social media sites. The chapter briefly touches on this in a discussion of ‘fake news.’ Although there’s a faddish over-circulation and saturation of the term in current conversations about the media system, we can’t let ‘fake news fatigue’ keep us from confronting the threat of systematic, well-funded, anti-democratic propaganda. We also should not hyper-focus on the manipulation of news around electoral cycles. Media and communications scholars have worked for years to analyse the ways in which nation-states and powerful firms organize systematic, very long-term, cross-platform propaganda efforts to block regulation, fight progressive policy, maximize profitability, and undermine social and ecological progress (Auerbach and Castronovo, 2013). This work will be central to addressing the current online iteration of propaganda and ‘fake news.’

## **Design is key**

I was glad to see that the chapter includes a discussion of design as a key area of analysis. Media and communication scholars have spent a great deal of time analysing the ‘moments’ of media production, circulation and consumption. We’ve spent less time considering the moment of design of information and communication technologies (ICTs), tools, platforms and software. We may need to more deeply engage with science and technology studies (STS) and human–computer interaction (HCI) scholarship in order to effectively propose an action plan for how to build a future media system that best advances human capabilities (Bardzell, 2010). Part of this work is also to reclaim the narrative of design and development of digital media from the neo-liberal mythology about how these tools and platforms have evolved (Hirsch, 2013). Ultimately, a media and communications system that advances social progress will be developed through the principles and practices of what a growing community of designers, developers and community organizers call design justice (Costanza-Chock, 2017).

## **Free software is barely discussed**

The free software movement is one of the most important sociotechnical processes in the struggle to develop a communicative system that might serve the interests of collective liberation and social justice, and deserves more discussion. I'm not suggesting that free software simply needs to be uncritically lauded. In laying out a grand vision for the future of the global media system we want, we have to come to terms with the failures of the free software movement as well as its power and potential. For example, free software powers most of the servers on the Net, but is also leveraged by all actors, including the multinational social media and search firms that have come to dominate traffic and monetize attention. Also, unfortunately, there is strong evidence that structural inequality is systematically reproduced in 'open' knowledge systems and spaces. For example, women are dramatically under-represented in free software development, making up just 2 per cent of code contributors, far worse than in proprietary software development (Reagle, 2012). Similarly, women are quite under-represented on Wikipedia, both in articles and in the community of authors and contributors (Ford and Wajcman, 2017).

## **Media policy proposals from civil society and social movements**

The chapter does not spend enough time exploring the multitude of concrete media and communications policy proposals that have been developed by civil society and social movement actors. For decades, social movements focused on media justice and communication rights have not only resisted the hegemony of neo-liberal communications systems, they have also developed frames, strategies and specific proposals about the governance and regulation of media, information, and communication systems (Padovani and Calabrese, 2014). For example, social movements played a key role in defeating past attempts to eliminate Net Neutrality (Benkler et al., 2015), although, as I write these words, the Trump-era Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has taken bold steps to do just that. The burgeoning counter-surveillance movement in the post-Snowden moment includes policy proposals, legal battles, and also grassroots practices such as Cryptoraves in Brazil or Cryptoharlem workshops in the USA. The Movement for Black Lives (2016) includes media and communications in their policy platform.

## **New tools and methods for media analysis**

It would also be useful for the IPSP to highlight new methods and tools that enable us to scale certain aspects of media analysis. For example, projects like OpenGenderTracker enable the semi-automation of gendered byline analysis, while PageOneX provides user-friendly approaches to front-page newspaper analysis (Costanza-Chock and Rey Mazón, 2016). Commercial tools and platforms like Google Trends and Ngram viewer, as well as open source projects like Media Cloud, have greatly simplified certain kinds of attention analysis. We should incorporate these tools into efforts to develop an ongoing progress index for the media and communication system.

## Intersectional media equity index

Finally, a powerful outcome of or follow-up project to the IPSP might be an intersectional Media Equity Index. Such an index might employ the tools mentioned above, and would include indicators of: media ownership (who owns the media), employment in media firms (who works in the media), content production (who makes the media), standing (who gets to speak in the media), and attention (who gets listened to). At the same time, this approach opens a normative conversation about what the goal should be. Are we proposing parity with the general population across all of these indicators? At what scale (for example, should a newspaper's diversity indicators be measured against the demographics of its readers, its potential readers, the population of the geographic area it serves)? What communities or identity categories are included in parity metrics? Do we attempt to correct for long-term historical domination of the media and communication system by White cisgender men from the global North and the colonizing countries? Do we seek communicative or media reparations for groups of people who were historically targets of a media system that reflected the interests of settler colonialism, Native genocide, slavery and anti-Blackness, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism? What would communication reparations look like?

Regardless of the answers to these questions, a project to gather and make legible various indicators of equity in the media and communications system would be potentially very powerful. With an intersectional lens, a media equity index could advance our understanding of social progress in the media and communication system beyond the handful of periodic 'gender in the media' and 'race in the media' reports that are currently produced.

## Conclusion

The IPSP chapter on 'Media, Communication, and the Struggle for Social Progress' provides a valuable and noteworthy synthesis of a very wide range of media and communication scholarship. To advance the IPSP's goals of measuring and encouraging social progress towards a media and communication system that promotes human capabilities, I have argued here that in addition to the many excellent proposals by the chapter authors, it will be crucial to address the following 10 key points: (1) we must name the specific forms of structural oppression that block social progress, including White supremacy, heteropatriarchy, capitalism, and settler colonialism (the matrix of domination). Naming these intersecting fields of power is an important step towards developing meaningful goals and metrics of social progress. (2) Representation still matters. With the broader focus on infrastructure and media policy, we should not lose sight of the fact that representation, in the mass media as well as in social media, is fundamentally unequal with regards to race, gender identity, sexual orientation, and other intersections. (3) Employment and ownership are important. Unfortunately, available indicators for gender and racial employment diversity in the media industries do not demonstrate progress. (4) Online hate speech is a problem that must be addressed at multiple levels, including legal, design and community practice. (5) The 'filter bubble' is an inadequate analytical framework for critique. Subaltern counterpublics are an important component

of a democratic public sphere, and marginalized groups already have knowledge of hegemonic groups' ideas. However, at the same time, state and corporate propaganda is a real problem, and we have much to learn from decades of communication scholarship on the topic. (6) We need design justice. Design justice is a growing social movement that focuses on the fair distribution of design's benefits and burdens; fair and meaningful participation in design decisions; and recognition of community based design traditions, knowledge, and practices. (7) Free software remains an important tool for social progress, but it must become a more diverse and inclusive field of practice. (8) Civil society and social movements have made important media policy proposals that we can lift up and fight to implement. (9) We have new tools for media analysis, and we should employ them and develop additional tools to build on existing approaches. (10) Finally, we can use these tools to develop an intersectional Media Equity Index and to better track progress towards a more just and equitable media and communications system.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## ORCID iD

Sasha Costanza-Chock  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0253-9654>

## References

- Auerbach J and Castronovo R (eds) (2013) *The Oxford Handbook of Propaganda Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bailey M (2013) New terms of resistance: A response to Zenzele Isoke. *Souls* 15(4): 341–343.
- Bardzell S (2010) Feminist HCI: Taking stock and outlining an agenda for design. In: *Proceedings of the SIGCHI conference on human factors in computing systems*, Atlanta, GA, 10–15 April, pp.1301–1310. New York: ACM Press.
- Benkler Y, Roberts H, Faris R, et al. (2015) Social mobilization and the networked public sphere: Mapping the SOPA-PIPA debate. *Political Communication* 32(4): 594–624.
- Collins PH (2002) *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. London: Routledge.
- Costanza-Chock S (2017) 'Notes on #design justice and digital technologies'. *Design justice Zine issue #3, design justice for action*. Available at: <http://designjusticenetwork.org/zine/> (accessed May 10, 2018).
- Costanza-Chock S and Rey-Mazón P (2016) PageOneX: New approaches to newspaper front page analysis. *International Journal of Communication* 10: 2318–2345.
- Crenshaw K (1991) Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review* 43: 1241–1299.
- David E (2017) Capital T: Trans visibility, corporate capitalism, and commodity culture. *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 4(1): 28–44.
- Driskill QL (ed.) (2011) *Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Interventions in Theory, Politics, and Literature*. Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press.
- Ford H and Wajcman J (2017) 'Anyone can edit', not everyone does: Wikipedia's infrastructure and the gender gap. *Social Studies of Science* 47: 511–527.

- Fraser N (1990) Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. *Social Text* (25–26): 56–80.
- Gerbner G and Gross L (1976) Living with television: The violence profile. *Journal of Communication* 26: 172–199.
- Gossett R, Stanley E, and Burton J (2017) *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Gray H (1995) *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for 'Blackness'*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Hirsch T (2013) TXTmob and Twitter: A reply to Nick Bilton. *Public Practice*, 16 October. Available at: <http://publicpractice.org/wp/?p=779> (accessed May 10, 2018).
- Massanari A (2017) #Gamergate and the Fapping: How Reddit's algorithm, governance, and culture support toxic technocultures. *New Media & Society* 19(3): 329–346.
- Mingus M (2010) Reflections from Detroit: Reflections on an opening: Disability justice and creating collective access in Detroit. In: *INCITE blog*, 23 August. Available at <https://inciteblog.wordpress.com/2010/08/25/reflections-from-detroit-reflections-after-the-4th-annual-incite-track-at-the-amc/> (accessed May 10, 2018).
- Movement for Black Lives (2016) 'Full access to technology – Including net neutrality and universal access to the Internet without discrimination – and full representation for all'. *A Vision for Black Lives: Policy Demands for Black Power, Freedom, & Justice*. Available at: <https://policy.m4bl.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Full-Access-To-Technology-Policy-Brief.pdf> (accessed May 10, 2018).
- Padovani C and Calabrese A (eds) (2014) *Communication Rights and Social Justice: Historical Accounts of Transnational Mobilizations*. Berlin: Springer.
- Pariser E (2011) *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You*. London: Penguin Books.
- Reagle J (2012) 'Free as in sexist?' Free culture and the gender gap. *First Monday*. Epub ahead of print 7 January. DOI: 10.5210/fm.v18i1.4291
- Squires CR (2002) Rethinking the Black public sphere: An alternative vocabulary for multiple public spheres. *Communication Theory* 12(4): 446–468.
- Treré E (2016) The dark side of digital politics: Understanding the algorithmic manufacturing of consent and the hindering of online dissidence. *IDS Bulletin*. Epub ahead of print 24 January. DOI: 10.19088/1968-2016.111
- Waters E and Yacka-Bible S (2017) *A Crisis of Hate: A Mid Year Report on Homicides Against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People*. New York: National Coalition of Anti-Violence Project (NCAVP).
- Wilson EJ, III, Costanza-Chock S and Forelle MC (2016) A provocation on behalf of the excluded. In: Lloyd M and Friedland LA (eds) *The Communication Crisis in America, and How to Fix It*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.249–266.

## Author biography

Sasha Costanza-Chock (pronouns: they/them/their) is associate professor of Civic Media at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. They are a faculty associate at the Berkman-Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University and creator of the MIT Co-Design Studio (codesign.mit.edu). Their work focuses on social movements, transformative media organizing, and design justice. Costanza-Chock's first book, *Out of the Shadows, Into the Streets: Transmedia Organizing and the Immigrant Rights Movement* was published by the MIT Press in 2014. They are a board member of Allied Media Projects (alliedmedia.org). For more information: schock.cc.