The Political Economy of Communication
3(2), 88–112

http://www.polecom.org

Toward a Political Economy of Framing: Putting Inequality on the Public Policy Agenda

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Keywords: framing, inequality, policy formation, political capital and information subsidies

Abstract

This article engages political economists of communication in a theoretical and pragmatic debate about the challenges of attempting to shape public discourse around critical social problems in ways that lead to a sustainable transformation of policy agendas at the local, national and international levels. Theoretical challenges to be explored are both varied and substantial. While the notion of information subsidies has been accepted as a framework through which to assess the relative power and effectiveness of participation in the public policy process, its application has been limited primarily to media agenda setting and studies of individual persuasion. There has been far less research concerning the links between power and influence across the legislative, regulatory, judicial and programmatic activities of governments. In light of dramatic changes in the media and information environment, as well as the theoretical approaches of political economists, this article will also attempt to advance thinking about audience labor – families and households. Here, I will examine the nature of investments that have been made, and must continue to be made in the development of social, economic and political capital as a resource for bringing about societal change. These considerations will be focused on problems involved in the development, assessment and delivery of strategic information subsidies in support of public policy initiatives which address the crisis of rising social, economic, and political inequality.

Writing in 1973, Herbert I. Schiller established a framework for the analysis of political communication under the umbrella of political economy that has yet to be displaced. *The Mind Managers* was a masterful characterization of the systems and institutions of mass communication as an instrument of economic, social and political control that was being pursued through the manipulation of consciousness (Schiller, 1973). Schiller didn't hesitate to characterize the United States as a 'divided society' in which this manipulation would produce a stable, if not permanent division of the population into two broad categories of 'winners' and 'losers'. This manipulation was enabled through the ownership and control of the media and affiliated sectors of specialized information production that provided policy-relevant content and assessed its impact on the public.

Mosco (2009) cites Schiller's contribution to the political economy of communication as reflecting common concerns about the nature of power and influence within society, something that mainstream neoclassical economists, perhaps with the exception of the new institutionalists, tended to ignore, or even deny. Schiller's focus on the role of strategic communication in combination with the assessment of its impact through the measurement of public opinion was consistent with Mosco's understanding of political economy as being concerned with the use of power in social relations. This can be recognized as "the ability to control other people, processes and things" (2009: 24). According to him, this concern about social relations within the context of a "social totality means understanding the connections between the political and the economic" (Mosco, 2009: 29). An important part of these connections is the role that communication plays, especially through the framing of issues and policy options in ways that alter the structure and performance of markets.

Some 40 years after the publication of *The Mind Managers*, critical writing and public debate is focused on the extent to which the vast inequality that Schiller described has actually worsened, not only in the U.S. but also around much of the world (Roemer, 2011). We are also beginning to ask whether the nature and extent of the methods used in the manipulation of public consciousness that Schiller described still reflects the information environment in which we find ourselves today. I will argue that despite the literal explosion in the number and variety of media outlets and distribution systems since the 1970s, the control and orientation of these systems has largely remained the same. Except that now, many would conclude that the pursuit of profit has almost completely displaced considerations of the public interest in choices concerning the kinds of content that should be produced and distributed to different audience segments. This shift in the information environment has been accompanied and to some degree enabled by a transformation of the political ideologies that have supported capitalist development around the world. In combination with changes in the nature of the media's distribution channels, the mobilization of an ideological campaign to replace democratic participation within the public sphere with a 'marketplace solution' has been enormously successful (Aune, 2001), despite a sustained critical response (Schiller, 1989, 1993).

In a collection dedicated to Schiller, Murdock and Wasko (2007) introduce the concept of 'marketization' as an alternative to 'neoliberalism' as the focus of critical enquiry into changes taking place within global scale communication systems. Contributors to this volume agreed that increases in the number and variety of media distribution channels allowed members of the audience to limit their attention to channels and content that matched their tastes and preferences. However, they also noted that the marketing and public relations sectors of the media industry had acquired an array of sophisticated techniques that enabled audience segmentation and the targeting of each segment with strategically framed persuasive messages. However, although it was largely absent from the essays in this important volume, the successful normalization of marketization within the media system has been accompanied by an almost equally dramatic increase in the levels of economic inequality around the world. Because rising public concern about inequality coincided with a renewed interest in the nature of the media audience as a commodity, and media consumption as a form of labor exploited by capital, I will extend political-economic debates about the nature of audience labor to include key arguments about inequality and its reproduction. Here, the role of the household and the family as a source for the reproduction of labor power and other forms of social, economic and political capital is of central importance. One must also acknowledge that households and families have the potential for mobilizing an organized resistance against the forces that have brought inequality to crisis levels.

By updating Schiller's analysis of the industries involved in the manipulation of information, knowledge, and public opinion, the challenges that we face in mounting an effective program of resistance will be identified, and a set of options laid out for consideration.

Information subsidies

Schiller's *Mind Managers* was a powerful influence on my thinking about the political economy of communication. That influence made its way through a dissertation that was focused on the methods by which an economic subsidy for the capitalization of education was established through a series of successful legislative and budgetary initiatives (Gandy, 1976). It was later that notions of a subsidy for the acquisition of capital equipment were transformed into a framework for understanding how political influence could be produced (through the same techniques that Schiller had identified with the manipulation of public opinion). While Schiller's critique had been focused on the government's propaganda and public relations efforts (Schiller, 1973: 44-51), I used the notion of "information subsidies" as a way to understand how targeted communications shaped the formation of government policies in education, health and the ideological transformation of governance under the rubric of 'Reaganomics' (Gandy, 1982).

Information subsidies, like other economic subsidies were designed to increase the consumption of some product or service by lowering its price. Since information subsidies were gifts, or discounts, rather than products for sale, what was important to me as a matter of theory and social praxis, was to discover how effective or productive these subsidies might be (in relation to the costs involved in designing, producing and delivering the right message to the right audience through the right media channel). Two classes of subsidies, direct and indirect, were defined and illustrated through examples. Generally, the ultimate target of an information subsidy was an elected official or a bureaucrat. Lobbyists were often identified as the sources of direct information subsidies that were communicated directly to elected officials, bureaucrats, or their staff. Indirect information subsidies were delivered through a great many channels, although journalists were identified as central intermediaries for the flow of these strategic messages. While there was considerable influence to be realized when policymakers' understanding of issues and concerns were established or altered through their exposure to media content, it was also important to include the multi-step paths through which members of the public might redistribute policy-relevant frames within their communities, and on occasion to public officials. More often than not, the path from the public to government officials went through an additional stage in the communications process whereby public opinion surveys (often developed by news organizations) were reported in the press and occasionally referred to in congressional testimony (Gandy, 2003). An analysis of the references made to public opinion surveys within legislative hearings revealed that surveys financed by information-intensive corporations, such as those working in the finance, credit and insurance sectors, reflected the kind of self-interested framing of issues that would convey an impression of a public willing to accept "reasonable" invasions of their privacy (Gandy, 2003: 292-296). Not all information subsidies were equally effective, or productive of policy outcomes. Many of those differences in productivity can be attributed to a failure on the part of a source to match the frames within messages with those of the targets (or with those of the intermediaries, who were bound to have well-established frames of their own) (Lakoff, 2002).

Communication scholars adapted the analysis of frames initially developed by Erving Goffman (1974) to the study of media and its role in public affairs (D'Angelo and Kuypers, 2010; Kendall,

2011; Pan and Kosicki, 2003; Reese, et al., 2001; Schaffner and Sellers, 2010). Manheim (2011) examined a host of additional factors that helped to determine the success or failure of 'influence campaigns'. These included the nature and extent of the information that subsidy providers were able to gather about similarities and differences in cognitive and affective receptivity. This would affect the productivity of any message as it was consumed, or processed by the target, or an intermediary. Unfortunately, the study of these techniques was of only marginal importance to political economists concerned with the audience, or other strategic targets of manipulative communications.

Engaging the audience

The past few years have seen an impressive increase in the amount of attention being paid to Dallas Smythe's early and influential contributions to our thinking about media audiences within the political economy of communication (Smythe, 1977). Particular attention is being paid to the nature of the audience as labor, or as a commodity, or as some variation of both, with a great number of additional complications being introduced along the way (Nixon, 2014). An excellent collection of some of this thinking has been published by McGuigan and Manzerolle (2014). An article originally published by Jhally and Livant in 1986 is reproduced in this volume. The article engages directly with the notion of audience segmentation, a process that reflects the differential market or political valuation of the audiences produced, or attracted by, media content. The authors framed this process as one designed to increase the productivity of audience labor by getting them to "watch extra" or more "intensely." Actually, when examined through the lens of information subsidies, segmented audiences do not have to work harder because they do not have to struggle to make sense of the messages being delivered by means of increasingly precise narrowcasting (Jhally and Livant, 2014: 107-109). These messages have been designed so that given audience segments can consume, digest, and incorporate them into their own cognitive sets or frames. This, in turn, will shape appreciations of the opportunities and challenges they are likely to face in their daily lives. If the matching of these strategically framed messages and background content to the tastes and preferences of audience segments succeeds, targeted audience members are likely to consume more of what they have been led to think of as inputs to their recreation, relaxation, or social interaction (rather than work).

In addition to this important extension of our thinking about the nature of the work that audiences do for marketers and others engaged in capitalist exploitation of labor power, I will argue that audience labor should be seen as an investment in different forms of capital that remain largely under the control of labor. Fuchs and Sandoval note the importance of the kinds of labor which are largely performed within the household and the patriarchal family as a mode of production. Here, the labor that is unwaged is associated with reproductive work and where the products of that work are owned by the family. Of course, we are reminded that the rise of capitalism "did not bring about an end to patriarchy, but the latter continued to exist in such a way that a specific household economy emerged that fulfills the role of the reproduction of modern labor power" (Fuchs and Sandoval, 2014: 502).

The audience work that family members do within their households reflects the myriad ways in which the use values generated through social reproduction affects the distribution of capital resources within each family and throughout the population. It is in this sphere of reproductive effort that mass media, including that produced and distributed under the control of capital, is used

as a resource in social reproduction. Part of the challenge here, both theoretically and politically, is that of separating the work that we do for capital from the work that we do in our own interests as we use commercial and other mass media content. I certainly do not discount the importance of Smythe's suggestion that part of the work that is done by audiences involves 'making sense', as consumers, of the commercial messages interspersed throughout broadcast programs. We readily understand this process of making sense as critical to the generation of demand for different commodities. However, it is also particularly important to recognize that not all of the advertisements or messages we are exposed to within the commercial media environment are about commodities that we acquire in the marketplace. A great many of these messages are about political candidates seeking electoral support. Others are messages designed to persuade us to oppose public policies or governmental actions that corporate interests see as threats to their bottom line. In addition, the notion that audience members are working for, or investing in, the development of their own capabilities invites us to at least consider that part of the communications literature found under the banner of 'information-seeking'. Important work in this area concerning the relationship between information-seeking and a variety of constraints, questions whether the so-called 'free marketplace of ideas' provides the kind of universal service to democracy that many would have us believe (Dervin, 1994). Media audiences might also be understood as working to expand their stocks of economic, social, cultural, symbolic (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1999), and even political capital (if we include the political work that is done in the making of classes, and shaping the conditions of their exploitation) (Bourdieu, 1987, 1989). These investments in political capital become particularly important when we consider that the ability of capital to enforce labor contracts (Gintis and Bowles, 1981). Such contracts, which may be as flimsy as those between media firms and the work of audiences, are potentially limited by political actions from organized members of the working class.

My interest in the household and the family in the reproduction of labor power is also driven by the realization that many constraints limit the ability of some family members to productively use the resources available to them (within the family, in the marketplace, or within the community). These are concerns about economic, social and political inequality and the nature of their reproduction across time (Gandy, 2009). While most of the factors shaping our 'life chances' are under the control of powerful others (Dahrendorf, 1979), there is no denying the role played by decision-making within households and particular communities. Many of those choices involve the use of the media and other information.

At one time, in the United States and other Western nations, much attention was paid to the amount, character and quality of the media being consumed within households. During the 1960s, concern about the influence of violent television programming led to an investigation of media exposure and its effects. This initial work was followed in the early 1970s by a rash of studies under the leadership of the U.S. Surgeon General's Committee on Television and Social Behavior. Public criticism, and political activism following the release of these reports, led to the 'voluntary' creation of something akin to a temporal safe harbor. The television networks agreed "to keep the evening hours from 7:00 to 9:00 free of themes that might be objectionable for child viewers" (Cantor, 1980: 50).

This concern about family viewing and the potential role in mediating the antisocial effects of exposure to television (Gerbner and Gross, 2002) has surely been dissipated in today's media environment. It is not at all unusual for each member of the family to be attending to at least one screen of their own while waiting for, or actually making their way through dinner. These days,

conversations about something in the news, or on the internet are far more likely to take place on a social media platform (SMS), rather than through face-to face interactions within the family. More critically, however, the differences between households in terms of the availability and use of content drawn from this expanded communication flow can be seen in terms of a 'digital divide' (Lievrouw and Farb, 2003; Murdock and Golding, 2004; Nakamura, 2004) between the haves-and the have-nots. Political economists were especially attentive to the consequences that might follow widening gaps in the access to information (Schiller, 1996). These gaps were not only associated with the inability to pay for access to subscriber-financed channels. Evidence of consumer segmentation was seen to be generating class distinctions based on disparities in communications competence defined as the ability "to understand and to be understood" (Gandy, 1988: 108).

These disparities were also seen to reflect the intersecting influences of knowledge, skill, and networked social capital (Hargittai, 2012). As the number of people who were engaging with technical and social resources through the internet increased, the costs of exclusion for those who were not connected rose dramatically. Such costs are expected to rise even more dramatically as more services migrate to the internet, and become difficult to acquire through traditional pathways (Wilson and Costanza-Chock, 2012). From what we have learned about the strategic management of newsfeeds by Facebook, we might actually discover that capitalist control over media use and sense making has increased. Furthermore, such control may have become more centralized, despite the fact that the variety of media platforms has expanded so dramatically (Sandvig, 2014; Somaiya, 2014).

Of course, the media are not the only, and perhaps not even the primary source of social learning that shapes the core values and beliefs behind our actions. While the influence of parents over the values of their children declines with age and the growing importance of peers, there is no denying that parents, and therefore households, underpin the development and reproduction of attitudes about others. Still, I think that our examination of household production should include the kinds of quality learning, or investments in the development of competence which allow the individual to become a better, more valuable worker (i.e. by taking courses and studying at home). We would want also to include forms of social learning through which these individuals become better human beings.

Inequality and capabilities

Differences in communicative competence are especially problematic within understandings of inequality associated with Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen (Sen and Foster, 1997). Sen's 'capabilities' approach considers those on the bottom rungs of a society's economic and social status ladder, as does John Rawl's approach to equality in his *Theory of Justice* (1971). Sen's work addresses theoretical issues within welfare economics that engage directly with problems associated with interpersonal comparisons of value (i.e. comparisons that derive from attempts to evaluate the social impact of public policies). Sen's approach is primarily concerned with the nature of opportunity and its distribution throughout society. It is about access to resources, as well as the ability of individuals to make use of those resources. Such ability also entails certain core rights that enable individuals to engage in activities that will advance the quality of their lives. One set of rights is related to the use of information. Access, in this regard, partly depends on the capacity to read and understand the information that comes in the form of digitally generated text. Educational attainment clearly plays a role in determining the extent to which these capabilities develop. But, as

noted previously, access to, and the ability to make efficient use of digital information systems also plays an increasingly important role in making sense of the contemporary information environment (Britz, et al., 2012). And lest we forget, bias and constraint in the supply of information that is relevant and therefore potentially useful to readers also limits the development of intellectual capabilities for some sectors of the population.

Because early applications of Sen's theory have occurred in the context of developing economies, there is special value in examining the capabilities that are distributed within the environments of wealthier European nations (Hobson, 2011). Some of the difficulties involved in measuring the nature of capabilities and their functionings have to do with the nature of constraints. Some of these may be structural, while others may be more closely linked with characteristics of the individual, including their values, preferences, and beliefs (about that which is possible, and that which may or may not be consistent with their long term interests). Among the points of value that are relevant to our concerns about inequality is the ease with which analysts are able to develop "capability sets" that include institutional, individual, and societal factors (Hobson, 2011: 158-162). These factors would permit analysts to identify the kinds of institutional settings that might enable the conversion of rights into capabilities, as well as those that could actually reinforce existing disparities. A great many observers have come to identify the neighborhood as one such institutional setting that shapes the development of capabilities (Gandy, 2009).

Households and the reproduction of labor power

Many will have encountered the claim that 'it takes a village to raise a child'. In part, this reflects our recognition of the important role that a neighbourhood or a community plays in social reproduction (Bischoff and Reardon, 2013). While we know that the school is a primary site for the reproduction of labor power, we also know that the level and quality of its impact on students' capabilities varies dramatically across neighborhoods and household locations (Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn. 2000). Our knowledge about the so-called 'neighborhood effect' has been mainly limited to an assessment of the negative influences of those places in the reproduction of disadvantage (McCann, 2002). Neighborhoods are understood spatially, in part because the experience of young people as individuals, as family members, and as participants in neighborhood schools, refer to where their identities are formed (Chetty et al., 2015).

It is important to understand how race, ethnicity and class shape identities in communities that are becoming more homogenous, or segregated along these lines (Jargowsky, 2015). That part of the literature which emphasizes the negative influence of the neighborhood on the disadvantaged generally begins by developing models of cumulative disadvantage. These focus on the characteristics of the household, while ignoring the structural influences on the limited opportunity sets available within those neighborhoods (Gandy, 2009). For example, developmental research shows that differences in cognitive ability across neighborhoods that barely exist at nine months of age become quite significant by the time youngsters celebrate their second birthday (Fryer and Levittt, 2013; Lynch, 2015). Clearly, the home environment is especially critical to the development and reproduction of inequality. This is also where youngsters gain access to resources like books, toys, games and the kinds of conversations that will develop capabilities and establish pathways to the future. Under a regime of marketization, lower income families have less of the time and money that access to these resources requires. Of course, in some neighborhoods, other sets of sociocultural and behavioral skills are developed through social interaction, including forms of play

that contribute to the advantages middle class children receive as they advance through school (Putnam, 2015). However, because of the rise of 'pay to play' rules in both public and private schools, youngsters from poorer families are being denied access to the kinds of extra-curricular activities, including intramural sports, which are powerful predictors of economic success and social mobility (Snellman, et al., 2015).

Despite this emphasis on neighborhood effects, I want to make it clear at this point that information is at the center of these concerns about the reproduction of labor power. Thus, if we understand the household as a site of social reproduction, then information is an input or a resource used in the production and reproduction of labor power. We also need to think about this information as an investment that enables families and individuals to develop or acquire different sorts of capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

Capital formation

Bowles and Gintis (1975) provide an early critique of human capital theory, focusing primarily on its failure to consider class, class conflict, or the actual processes involved in the reproduction of labor power. Without denying the role of individual and family choice with regard to social reproduction, the authors recognize the differences between the contributions made by schooling, and those that are developed within the household and community. In addition, they remind us of the critical role of human capital formation in shaping "the social relations of production and the evolution of class relations" (Bowles and Gintis, 1975: 80-81). The human capital approach to the development of competence has been compared to Sen's capabilities analyses within ongoing debates about the connections between education and the problem of inequality (Walker, 2011). While the human capital approach promises economic growth as a by-product of expanded educational attainment, increasing economic inequality points to a serious shortcoming in that model. Social capital might be considered as the form of capital most closely associated with households and the neighborhoods within which they exist. Among the various capitals associated with the contributions of Bourdieu (1987, 1989) and others (Cooper, 2008), social capital appears centrally related to civic engagement (Putnam, 2003) and social cohesion as factors contributing to upward mobility (Prewitt et al., 2014). Like human capital, social capital, in contradistinction to economic capital is depleted not through use, but a lack of use (Prewitt et al., 2014: 42).

Political capital

Political capital has not captured the same level of attention as social, economic, or even cultural capital. But because political capital is understood in terms of associated exercises of power, its application in the political process and in the production of influence over governments deserves particular identification. Where cultural capital is readily understood as an investment in oneself, perhaps as a form of self-improvement (Bourdieu, 1986: 18-22), a rather different and more complex pattern of efforts is involved in the development of political capital networks and alliances. Like cultural and social capital, political capital accumulation is said to involve the development and use of certain social skills, as well as the capability to convince others to combine in the service of a common goal (Kauppi, 2003: 778). It is best to think of political capital as a form of symbolic capital utilized and struggled over within the political field. Like cultural capital, political capital is often discussed in terms of the individuals who possess it. However, political capital is also an important resource which is accumulated by organizations or institutions in civil society as well as

by capitalist firms through their interactions with the state. Political capital is an aspect of empowerment often defined in terms of the capabilities which appear when community groups negotiate with powerful 'stakeholders' in an attempt to influence development projects (Turner, 1999).

The quite substantial increase in federal, state and local requirements for active participation by representatives of community organizations and individual residents reflects and reifies the power that these stakeholders have gained as a result of political engagement (Shepherd and Bowler, 1997). For other observers, fundamental changes in the communications infrastructure make it easier for the average person to communicate with an elected official, or engage in other political activities such as signing a petition (De Zúñiga, et al., 2010). While the levels of political engagement have increased within some segments of the population, what remains to be determined is the extent to which this enables the achievement of policy relevant goals.

Gilens and Page (2014) set out to test the leading theories about the nature of political power without attempting to associate political influence with expenditures of political capital. What they conclude is: "When the preferences of economic elites and the stands of organized interest groups are controlled for, the preferences of the average American appear to have only a miniscule, near-zero, statistically non-significant impact upon public policy" (575-576). In addition, they suggest that the preferences of affluent citizens have a greater impact on policy change than the preferences of the average citizen. Gilens and Page raise a key question about the ability of these elites to shape mass opinion, but they are unable to provide an answer as to why with the same level of confidence. This is because social scientists have simply not invested much into exploring the relationship between media consumption and perceptions of inequality (Friedland, et al., 2012: 288). And, very few have examined how the problem of inequality has been framed within the media or within the environments in which related policies are formed. This is a space within the literature and the public sphere that political economists of communication are uniquely able to fill.

Information subsidies and policy formation

As noted earlier, there is already a substantial literature on lobbying as a means of delivering direct information subsidies. Much of this research is focused on communications that are delivered directly to legislators or bureaucrats. Much less scholarly attention has been focused on the *indirect* paths that go through non-governmental organizations or interest groups rather than professional lobbyists. Even less attention is given to the strategic communications that are delivered through the mass media that might reach policymakers or, more indirectly still, engaged citizens (including representations of their views as estimated through public opinion surveys).

The decision by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Citizens United v. FEC* (Epstein, 2011; Feingold, 2012) attracted considerable public attention and protest in regard to corporate contributions to election campaigns. Yet, this was merely the latest revelation concerning the ability of corporations to influence public policy (as providers of information subsidies through their role as 'speakers' with First Amendment rights) (Kerr, 2008; Piety, 2012). The fact that the Court's decision did not markedly affect the value of corporate stocks for the most politically engaged corporations supports this conclusion (Werner, 2011).

Indirect information subsidies

I have argued that indirect information subsidies may be more efficient, or more productive of political influence. We commonly assume that political actors are likely to 'apply a grain of salt' to those messages in which the identity and interests of the source are widely known. Thus, when the true source of a message is hidden, behind a more 'trusted' source such as a newspaper, or an even more trusted source, such as a university expert or an independent research center, far less of that cognitive salt is applied. In addition to concerns about bias associated with a source's conflicts of interest, or divided loyalties, there is also likely to be some assessment of their credibility, authority and legitimacy. This means that in given policy areas, some sources, as a category, have more apparent credibility or weight than others.

There is also a new understanding about how changes in the news business have increased journalists' dependence upon well-crafted information subsidies (as typically provided by professional public relations people). Journalists have less time to do research because their writing is continually subjected to evaluation in terms of audience attention, engagement, and value (Napoli, 2014). Journalists need sources that can provide stories likely to capture the attention of the right audiences, without undermining the objectives of the marketers who are engaged in competitive bidding for access to these audiences.

At the same time, the new media environment appears to be influencing how public relations practitioners are pitching stories to media professionals. The most significant change concerns the use of bloggers within a process called "media catching". Connections between journalists and interested sources are also made through "expert request services" designed to "serve the needs of journalists who are looking for sources and information and public relations practitioners who are willing to give" (Waters, et al., 2010: 248).

Protest

Protests are also information subsidies. Sometimes they take place directly, within the sight or hearing of their targets, but most often, protests are indirect subsidies in that they depend upon the news media to capture, frame, and redistribute the messages that are being conveyed. Even riots of the kind that have broken out following the death of African Americans in police custody, or in South Central Los Angeles (Watts) some 50 years ago have much in common with orderly marches for civil rights. All of these activities are a strategic expression of social discontent or dissatisfaction. As Gilje (1996) puts it, "Riots are moments when people in the street… make themselves heard and reveal how they interact with others in society" (6). And Gilje insists that these activities are rational, "riotous crowds do not merely act on impulse and are not fickle. There is a reason behind the actions of rioters, no matter how violent those actions may be" (7).

Protests, unlike text based information subsidies generally do not have the same potential for shaping published stories that would suit the perspectives or frames of the protestors. In an analysis of how the *New York Times* covered the Occupy Wall Street protest, Gottlieb (2015) suggested that the story frames were affected by a variety of professional and structural concerns over time. He gave the protestors credit for presenting a unique identity meme (the 99%) that could be used throughout the campaign. In accordance with long-standing journalistic practices, early frames emphasizing economics gave way to conflict frames in the later stages of the "issue attention cycle"

(Gottlieb: 2015: 17-18). While protestors may get their share of 'ink' by feeding the media's taste for conflict, they are far less likely to obtain public profile for their issues, claims, and evidence.

Framing

As mentioned earlier, this article focuses, pragmatically, on the power, or effectiveness of frames as resources for the production of influence over public policies (in ways that might reduce, and eventually reverse the growth of social, economic and political inequality). Framing refers to the organization and structure of arguments used to identify: 1) the problem; 2) the parties responsible for that problem; and 3) the solutions (plus their rationales or justifications) that might bring about change at the cognitive, affective, and behavioral levels (Entman, 1993). Framing, as a strategy for the production of influence, or political capital, also involves choosing the right pathway for delivering information to the appropriate policy actors. Sometimes those pathways are thought about as devices and networks, but mostly they refer to other people, defined in institutional terms. For example, most of the work on framing and information subsidies is focused on journalists and journalism within the rapidly evolving digital media environment. Some, but not enough of that work focuses on the sources of information that journalists rely upon as they struggle to meet dramatically shortened deadlines.

Framing is also about the structuring of a message such that it will be understood as was intended for a particular audience segment. For example, we have learned, without changing the underlying facts, that how we frame inequality or 'comparative risk' can influence how certain people will understand the problem and the proposed solutions (Bigman, 2014; Gandy and Li, 2005). Similarly, it matters whether we say African Americans earn 25% less than whites, or Whites earn 25% more than African Americans. Social psychologists suggest that one might have a whole set of associations with the group that is the target of the comparison. Many of these associations lead people to assign blame, or responsibility to the victims for the hardships that limit their opportunities.

Framing for a social movement

With regard to the use of frames by social movement organizations (SMOs), Benford and Snow's (2000) research has been especially important. They identify "collective action frames" as the products of a process through which SMOs were engaged in "the production and maintenance of meaning for constituents, antagonists, and bystanders or observers" (Benford and Snow, 2000: 613). These frames are collective because of the highly interactive process through which they are developed for strategic use within political struggles. In this context, frames service to mobilize supporters and to challenge the authority of opponents. Sociology and political science scholars characterize different kinds of frames according to the functions they serve within SMO mobilization campaigns. Among the most common types are 'diagnostic frames'; those that identify problems and assign blame or responsibility. 'Prognostic frames' are designed to answer the familiar question: 'what is to be done?' Motivational frames concern the extent to which diagnostic and prognostic frames clarify and reinforce the sense of injustice associated with the victimization of identifiable population segments. All of these frames are closely related, conceptually and in practice (Benford and Snow, 2000: 615-617; Gamson, 1992: 31-58).

It is clear that the production and distribution of collective action frames is not a straightforward process that could be specified in a policy and procedures manual akin to those within capitalist

firms (Benford and Snow, 2000; Schaffner and Sellers, 2010). There are many internal and external constraints, including those related to what has been characterized as the 'political opportunity structure' that significantly affect attempts to produce influence on public policy (Benford and Snow, 2000: 628-629). Assessing the success of these efforts in reaching specified goals or policy outcomes is even more difficult (Bleich, 2011). Rather than generalizable evaluations of SMO campaigns, we have selected descriptions of particular campaigns and their relationship to legislative victories. In some cases, changes in policies and practices over time can be associated with extended campaigns (D'Angelo and Kuypers, 2010; Manheim, 2011; Schaffner and Sellers, 2010). Part of the challenge in developing a comprehensive assessment of 'framing contests' derives from the fact that most policy concerns rarely have a definitive end point; the struggles just continue with a different set of frames and organizations (Froud, et al., 2012).

It is evident from the preceding discussion that economic, social and political inequality are all closely linked. Unfortunately, not everyone agrees that inequality is a problem; many believe that inequality has always been a fact of nature and will continue to be so in the future. This is especially true for economic inequality, which some regard not as a problem but as a motivation or social nudge that encourages the development of one's own capabilities (in order to compete effectively in the marketplace). Still, the positive public response to the publication in English of Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2014) suggests that the time has come for engagement with the problem of inequality as something that needs to be addressed within the public policy environment (McArdle, 2014; Wade, 2014). Even before Piketty's public prominence, a growing number of scholars had come to perceive inequality as a serious global problem. This concern helps explain the increase in domestic and comparative studies focusing upon the relationship between income inequality and other measures of the quality of life (including the relationships between people, and between people and their governments). These studies do not simply regard inequality as a problem for those who do not have reliable access to the necessities of life. Inequality is also understood as a problem for societies as a whole, at least within the worlds conceived by economists and statisticians (Stiglitz, 2012). Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) make it quite clear in *The Spirit Level* that even when comparisons are made across the categories we generally associate with social class, those living in more equal societies are better off. This is markedly evidence for those at the bottom, but is also the case for those nearer the top. On the other hand, higher levels of inequality also seem to be negatively associated with tolerance for people of other races, ethnicities, sexual identities, or political ideology. In the United States, economic inequality also appears to be closely linked to the growth of a political polarization that results in the normalization of gridlock within state legislatures. The fact that this process is accompanied by a rightward shift in the ideological median within state legislatures makes it even more difficult for progressive proposals to succeed at the state level (Voorheis, et al., 2015: 30).

Framing inequality as a problem

Once again, let me be clear. I am not driven by some naïve assumption about how deliberative democracy works, or by a simple adherence to Habermasian idealizations of communicative interaction (Habermas, 1990). Politics is not like that, not even in the best of times. But ideas do matter; public opinion is an operational constraint to which even Supreme Court Justices pay attention. In this regard, I am suggesting that the struggle against inequality is a struggle for the production of influence over the cognitive, affective and behavioral responses of policy makers, by

direct and indirect means. The challenge is not simply to frame inequality as a problem worthy of public intervention. One must also provide an analysis of inequality which identifies the causal factors (including specific actors, or categories of actors who are responsible for the prevailing patterns and trends). This also means that actors and institutions that have the responsibility and the capability to take corrective action must be identified. And finally, for completeness, this strategic framing will have to present the actions and underlying rationales that are likely to have the most potential for achieving our policy goals.

Identifying the responsible actors

Identifying the actors who bear primary responsibility for the inequalities in income and wealth that have attracted so much media attention is a serious, and difficult, problem. Certainly we could generally say that the wealthy and the powerful are largely responsible for the public policies that shape the distributions of income, and the protection of that income from the burdens of taxation. But generalizations are not enough. We must specify the actions taken (or not taken) that have established these constraints on the distribution of income and the accumulation and transfer of wealth. We can identify the legislators, bureaucrats and jurists who support or oppose the policies that are likely to increase inequality. The votes they have cast and the opinions they have expressed constitute public evidence. But it is far more difficult, and often impossible, to identify and characterize members of the public in terms of the financial support they may have allocated to decision-makers within the government (especially those individuals within the top one per cent).

Identifying those who are supporters or opponents of policies designed to achieve greater equality is not quite the same as developing the information and arguments that will sway the moveable. The relevant frames are likely to vary dramatically across policy proposals. This is a problem in part because almost every important bill being considered by a legislative body is likely to impact on inequality as well as its primary target.

The research dimension

The design and delivery of strategically effective information subsidies is dependent upon substantive theory and research. My thinking in this regard has been greatly influenced by an organization composed primarily of communications researchers who specialize in the analysis and evaluation of frames. I am referring to the FrameWorks Institute (www.frameworksinstitute.org.). One of nine non-profit organizations that received MacArthur Foundation awards for in 2015, the Foundation mentioned the success that FrameWorks has had in developing key terms and phrases with the potential to anchor organizations and their projects in the public mind. They are credited with developing the term ‘toxic stress’ to characterize the consequences of ‘chronic exposure to adversity’, as well as the term ‘heat trapping blanket’ (used by non-profit environmental groups as well as the Environmental Protection Agency to encapsulate the effect of greenhouse gases on climate change) (MacArthur Foundation, 2015).

FrameWorks’ approach to strategic framing sets out the public values and opinions around the core issues that concern progressives. Periodically, ‘message briefs’ are issued on specific topics that provide guidance for policy activists, including one termed ‘talking about disparities’ (Davey, 2009). This approach involves content analysis of the mass media to identify the dominant frames associated with key issues. FrameWorks also interview members of the public to understand what they call the ‘default cultural models’ that people use to make sense of a social problem.

Additionally, experimental surveys are employed to distinguish between frames which trigger dominant, but unhelpful cognitive frames, and those which trigger more progressive, transformative frames. Their discussion of the challenges involved in addressing the problems of educational reform emphasize this. Here, equity concerns are the critical element in what they call the 'swamp' of education (Bales and O'Neil, 2014).

While the Institute has been quite successful in evaluating the cognitive and affective impact of their carefully developed message frames, it is not yet clear how successful these efforts are in terms of policy formation and change. There is also considerable uncertainty about the extent to which these contributions have mobilized and developed programs of intervention (Manuel, 2011).

Identifying the solutions

Lessons learned from the movement against neoliberalism and globalization highlight the difficulties of developing prognostic frames for actions that will address the problems associated with inequality. In part, the struggle to develop rationales for actions also involves decisions about where strategic attention should be focused: at local, national or international scales. More problematically, we also have to decide whether to engage with the legislative, judicial, or administrative forms of governmental activity.

As mentioned, the political science literature foregrounds a political opportunity structure which allows us to determine where, in the policy infrastructure, the greatest possibility for producing influence is located (Benford and Snow, 2000). Appropriate tax policy, for example, would mean a reduction in the taxes that harm the already disadvantaged, such as those on the consumption of life's necessities. It might also mean raising taxes on capital investment, especially those producing speculative capital gains, while other provisions might deliver special tax breaks for social investments. Each of these options will shape the nature and extent of public support for redistribution (Ashok, et al., 2015). Tax-oriented solutions are especially important at the state, or provincial level, because this is where social benefits that do the most to reduce inequality are being underfunded. Wealthy elites make more money than most, and shelter it from tax authorities, leaving local and regional social budgets, unable to finance important social services, including education (Roemer, 2011). Rather than framing our appeals in terms of taxing rich people, many would prefer to tax corporations, and reduce their capacity for avoidance (McIntyre, et al., 2011).

There are many proposals that are being offered as a way to narrow the gap between the top percentiles in wealth and income. Those that emphasize further education and training may be used to blame the victim (Hershbein, et al., 2015). I am not opposed to expanding access to education. Indeed, it is crucially important to construct local tax policies that will improve the quality and performance of the schools that are failing to provide poorer students opportunities for personal and collective advancement. With education as a central focus, it should be possible to take advantage of the special place that children have in our sense of who deserves our attention and support. However, regarding children as important and likely targets for support does not mean that we should automatically give their parents, or even their schools (and teachers) the money and resources. Advancing the life chances of children in this context is a challenge we will have to address head on. There has also been discussion about the role that criminal justice policy can play in removing the sources of disadvantage that affect poor and minority communities (Travis and Western 2014). This will require direct engagements with a prison-industrial-complex in which

occupancy rates are guaranteed by contracts between US counties and states and private commercial firms.

As I have suggested, careful and innovative research efforts will be needed to help us choose a policy response that will work, 'if and only if' it has the possibility of being chosen in the first place. Unfortunately, as Ta-Nehisi Coates has reminded us, some options, like reparations for African Americans, cannot even gain support as a researchable option, even though such a proposal has been introduced by Representative John Conyers at every session of Congress for the past 25 years (Coates, 2014). The challenge, of course, is to frame whatever options we develop as being at least worthy of discussion.

Evaluating the productivity of frames

Productivity in the realm of political action means pretty much the same that it does within industrial organizations: the amount and quality of measured activity that can be attributed to the use of particular resources. In this context, social movement organizations (SMOs) are constrained, and as a result, they have to choose between alternative campaign strategies. They do this on the basis of the relationships between particular kinds of investments of resources and the outcomes that have been achieved. Frames are among the resources that have to be evaluated in terms of their productivity. Evaluations of information subsidies, including the influence of frames, have focused on success at the cognitive and affective levels rather than on the legislative or judicial level. From a political economy perspective, we need an assessment of frame productivity at the level of mainstream and alternative media. This could be measured in terms of the frequency with which preferred frames appear within targeted media outlets. The rate at which these frames appear within official communications or documents generated at the legislative and judicial level could also be assessed. Communication flows from supporters and challengers within SMOs could be subject to the same evaluations.

Choosing the right frames to use as indirect subsidies requires a determination of how best to attract the attention of journalists or other gatekeepers. They are increasingly being guided by, if not actually being replaced by, algorithms designed to maximize the access and engagement of valued audience members (Gandy, 2012; Nguyen, 2013). Napoli (2014) describes the role of "content farms" that "mine search engine data to estimate demand for content on various topics, and then produce that content rapidly and cheaply in order to meet that demand" (349). Napoli observes a tension here between the bottom line and traditional news values.

Some story ideas, especially those involving racial disparity will face considerable media resistance. While the selection of stories in the past entailed some assessment of 'newsworthiness', journalistic decision-making these days is increasingly focused on the bottom line. One study examining standards of newsworthiness among health journalists discovered that the old standard of 'if it bleeds it leads' still affected stories about racial disparities in health (stories about progress in reducing those disparities tended to be rated poorly) (Hinnant, et al., 2011). From the large number of components that journalists take into account in evaluating a story, their sense of its 'publishability' was seen to be the most important dimension. In this regard, journalistic standards associated with the public interest seem likely to play a subordinate role in the future (Pickard, 2015).

Another challenge relates to the need to develop analytical approaches appropriate to the emergence of various web-based media platforms. For Twitter and mainstream news media online,

web crawler analyses of hyperlinks over time might help to assess the impact of strategic campaigns. A recent report from the Pew Research Center (Smith, et al., 2014) provided an assessment of political discourse on Twitter. Although its users are a comparatively small segment of the adult population and of internet users in general, they are especially attentive to public discussions about political issues. Twitter users were also deemed worthy of study in that they held opinions at odds with those of the general public, and sub-divided themselves into "distinct partisan camps" (Smith et al., 2014: 1).

Analytical approaches, associated with big data and computational linguistics locates individuals within a 'web of relationships' that develop as issues play out within the Twitter platform. The Pew report focused on six 'maps' of the 'crowds' or clusters that emerged from their analyses of tweets. These maps not only help us understand the changing role of social media within society, they can also be used to identify points of "strategic influence" within the developing discourse around social issues (Smith, et al., 2014: 4). Because the development of these social network maps identifies the individuals who have used the same terms or phrases, relevant policy frames can be constructed. The primary concern about this particular analysis of Twitter data is that the "snapshots" of data were not compared over time, although the researchers noted that such analyses would be possible (Smith, et al., 2014: 33). Such an approach might represent a substantial improvement over the expensive and time-consuming enterprise of gathering data through interviewing countless journalists and editors. However, we still require information about how tweets influence gatekeepers' decisions over the framing of issues (Parmlee, 2013). Here, journalists report that they make use of Twitter "because it is free and economic pressures on newsrooms increasingly force journalists to look for cost-saving alternatives for newsgathering and story promotion" (Parmlee, 2013: 5). Additionally, journalists indicate that tweets from bloggers, think tanks and interest groups are valued more highly than those received from politicians. Not surprisingly, despite routinely utilizing these subsidies in their constructions of the news, journalists continue to deny that these tweets substantially influence their reporting. The fact that they actually quote tweets within their stories, however, suggests that one could map the paths through which influential frames make their way in and through the policy formation system (Tufekci, 2014a).

The *New York Times* has made available an online resource (chronicle.nytlabs.com) similar to that provided by Google (https://books.google.com/ngrams/) that enables users to chart the rise and fall of words and phrases that appear in the newspaper. It should thus be possible to update the claims made by Etzioni (1988: 217-236) on the impact of efforts to influence government decisions about the economic performance of firms within the marketplace. For Etzioni, the forms of market power derived from business concentration or monopoly status was associated with the capacity of such firms to influence government decisions through communicative interaction and financial contributions. While Etzioni noted the importance of intervention by individual firms, he suggested that the ability of coalitions to mobilize resources in support of common interests was far more influential. He recognized that there are limitations to the intra-market benefits that corporations derive from the production of influence over the government. However, he also believed that investments in such influence were often more substantial than the returns from research and development or from the search for efficiencies in the production, distribution and marketing of goods and services.

The challenge for political economists of communication is to develop data and analytical models that evaluate various strategies for reframing debates concerning the nature of inequality

and the policies and programs that might alleviate it. The insights derived from this investigative effort should advance the development of a program of coordinated political intervention.

Moral and ethical concerns

In addition to problems involving technology, methodology and access to the data needed to relate information subsidies to public discourse and policy action, these subsidies have to be actually delivered within the contemporary media environment. In this regard, I have been quite critical in the past about the consequences for democracy that flow from the implications of telling different stories, or making different appeals to an increasing variety of audience segments (such stories or appeals are made 'visible' through use of the same technologies that facilitate surveillance) (Gandy, 2009, 2013). I have tried to find some comfort in the distinctions drawn by a former colleague, Ed Baker, between corrupt and, what I would call, authentic segmentation (Baker, 2002). He suggested that "uncorrupt segmentation" would respond to each person's interests as they experienced them, not as they are valued by the market. More critically, he suggested that "market-determined segmentation would not favor political ideology, unprofitable ethnic and cultural divisions, the comparatively poor, or any lifestyle needs and interests not easily exploited for marketing purposes" (Baker, 2002: 183-184).

Still, I am troubled by my own felt need to use audience segmentation and targeting in order to deliver policy relevant frames in the most efficient and productive ways. I am also troubled by my naïve assumptions about democracy as an ideal, and about my narrow reading of Habermas regarding the purposes of democratic communication, especially in light of the critiques offered by Nancy Fraser (1990). In the latter context, I can certainly appreciate the importance of subaltern oppositional groups coming together, in private, to develop their own understanding of public issues. Struggles over frames will take up considerable time and effort in the building of the kinds of coalitions that will move such issues forward. But when it comes down to the final votes, and then when the regulations are issued, and the guidelines for implementation are drawn up, I still believe that the same underlying values will have to underpin our justifications for acting in one way rather than another.

Conclusions and recommendations

The issue of inequality is too critically important for us to continue sticking our heads in the sand while the applications and uses of discriminatory technologies in the public sphere continue to expand. The implications of 'big data' for socioeconomic discrimination and for the laws and regulations that might limit it are troublesome, to say the least (Tufekci, 2014b: 15). Advances in computational linguistics now make it possible for analysts to predict the answers that individuals would probably give if the political consultants wanted to waste their resources questioning them in the first place. Indeed, because it is still illegal or impractical to ask some questions, reliance on the analysis of 'public' communication flows makes more sense, as long as the models have achieved an acceptable level of accuracy in inferring what the answers to public opinion survey questions might actually have been. As Tufekci (2014b: 22) notes, this level of access to public consciousness begins to approach levels of confidence that were traditionally limited to experiments. In part, this is because online providers of information services routinely engage in real time experiments with their massive number of users (Manjoo, 2014). And, although there are occasional spikes of public outrage when stories about these experiments make their way into the press, there is little in the way

of hope that some kind of 'institutional review board' will be evaluating the nature of the risk/benefit tradeoffs being made.

Despite my deeply felt opposition to arguments about the need for segmentation and targeting, I understand the logic behind trying to mobilize resources and target them at population segments that have the greatest potential to influence the policy system. I agree that forming and sustaining a coalition, and moving toward consensus may involve rationales or explanations that resonate with different population segments (based on their own deeply held values, as well as their concrete social experiences). Part of the decision about when and where to focus resources involves an assessment about which investments are likely to be most productive. Such a determination might be based on the identification of groups most likely to support both the goals and the strategies of a particular policy initiative. Unfortunately, this is not a simple process.

The *Opportunity Agenda* (2014) has used cluster analysis to identify and characterize six categories of people within the U.S. population in terms of whether they might support efforts to reduce inequality and expand opportunity. The "core catalysts" (some 19 percent of the adult population) identified as being most committed to these goals, are made up primarily of racial and ethnic minorities, political liberals, and unmarried women. Such people are most likely to have experienced what they regard as unfair treatment, and are thus most likely to take oppositional action. The "resistants", on the other hand, are some 10 percent of the population. Most members of this cluster are married men and Republicans who do not see equality as being much of a problem. Overall, age, race and ethnicity are among the most powerful predictors of likely support for improving opportunity and outcomes. Among primary supporters for the alleviation of inequality, some 56 percent say that they are "less than middle class," but not poor. It seems that self-identification of class status or position is not a straightforward basis for choosing initial targets for involvement in a movement for change.

Here again, political economists of communication might assist in assessing the extent to which race, gender, social class, political party, neighborhood characteristics or any other markers of identity would be useful (and appropriate) as a basis for planning a strategic intervention. It seems clear to me that there is much work to be done, and we need to get started now on this critically important project.

Author Bio

Oscar Gandy is an emeritus professor of communication who retired from active teaching in 2006. His research and teaching was in the area of political economy with an emphasis on media institutions, communication and race, privacy and surveillance and communications and information policy. An active scholar before and after his retirement, professor Gandy has published in excess of 75 articles and chapters, and authored four well-received books (Beyond Agenda Setting, Communication and Race, The Panoptic Sort, and Coming to Terms with Chance).

Acknowledgments

Earlier versions of this article were delivered at the 19th Annual Dallas Smythe Memorial Lecture at Simon Fraser University, March 26, 2015, and in the Political Economy Section at the IAMCR conference in Montreal, July 13, 2015.

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