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

Political Economy Section

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to engage the political economists of communication in a theoretical and pragmatic debate about the challenges as well as the importance 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. There has been far less success in efforts to establish the links between power and influence at the level of legislative, regulatory, judicial and programmatic activities of governments.

In light of dramatic changes in the nature of the media and information environment, and in the area of theoretical development by political economists, this paper will also attempt to advance thinking about audience labor by examining the nature of investments that have been made, and must continue to be made in development of social, economic and political capital as a resource for bringing about change.

These theoretical and practical considerations will be focused on problems involved in the development, assessment and delivery of strategic information subsidies in support of public policy initiatives in relation to the crisis of rising social, economic, and political inequality.

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Introduction

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). He didn't hesitate to characterize the United States as a "divided society" in which this manipulation would result in a stable, if not permanent division of the population into two broad categories of "winners" and "losers." This manipulation was facilitated through the ownership and control of the media and the affiliated sectors of specialized production that provided content and assessed its impact on the public.

Some 40 years later, critical writing and public debate has been focused on the extent to which the vast inequality that Schiller described had actually worsened, not only in the U.S. but also around much of the world (Roemer, 2011). The challenge we are facing today is one that requires us to confront the future on the basis of claims made by Schiller and others in the past. We need to ask, if only rhetorically, whether the nature and extent of the manipulation of consciousness that Schiller described in the past is still an apt description of 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 that have been developed since the 1970s, the fundamental control and orientation of these systems has in fact narrowed, and the pursuit of profit has almost completely displaced any consideration of the public interest in the choice about what kinds of content should be produced and distributed. In a collection dedicated to Schiller, Murdock and Wasko (2007) introduce the concept of "marketization" as an alternative to references to "neoliberalism" as the focus of critical engagement with the changes taking place within communication systems at a global scale.

Contributors to this volume noted that while increases in the number and variety of media distribution channels made it possible for members of the audience to limit their attention to channels and content that more closely matches their preferences, the marketing and public relations industries acquired an array of sophisticated technologies that enable the more precise segmentation and targeting of these audiences with persuasive messages. In combination with changes in the nature of the media environment, the mobilization of an ideological campaign to replace democratic participation within the public sphere with a "marketplace solution" has been enormously successful (Aune, 2001). The success in spreading the gospel of

marketization has been accompanied by an almost equally dramatic increase in the levels of economic inequality around the world.

Because rising public concern about inequality has just happened to coincide with a renewed interest in the nature of the media audience as a commodity, we will return to the debates surrounding the nature of audience labor. Through a focus on the role of the household and the family as a site and a source for the reproduction of labor power and other forms of social, economic and political capital, the possibility that organized resistance against the forces that have brought inequality to crisis levels will be explored.

By updating Schiller's analysis of the industries involved in the manipulation of knowledge, information and public opinion as it relates to the formation and public policies that reinforce and reproduce socioeconomic disparity, the challenges that we face in mounting an effective program of resistance will be identified, and a set of options will be laid out for consideration.

Background

Schiller's *Mind Managers* was a powerful influence on my thinking about the political economy of information. 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 series of successful legislative and budgetary initiatives (Gandy, 1976). Only a small part of that project was concerned with the efforts of the audiovisual industry to influence the creation and funding of this massive subsidy.

It was during the period in which a post-doctoral fellowship was provided by George Gerbner that notions of a subsidy for the acquisition of capital equipment were transformed into a framework for understanding how political influence could be produced with the same techniques that Schiller had identified as manipulation. While Schiller's critique was 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 referred to as "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 the information subsidies were gifts, rather than products for sale, what was important as a matter of theory, was how effective they were in relation to the costs involved in producing and delivering them to their targets. 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

identified as the sources of many of the direct information subsidies that were communicated directly to the targets, or their staff.

Indirect information subsidies were delivered through a great many channels, although journalists were identified as the primary paths through which this information would flow. While there was considerable influence to be realized when policymakers' understanding of issues and concerns was altered or established 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, the path from the public to those officials went through an additional mass media cycle when public opinion surveys, often developed by news organizations were reported in the press, or were referred to in congressional testimony (Gandy, 2003).

Of course, not all information subsidies were equally effective. A large part of those differences were associated with the failure to match the frames, or the structural features of arguments about the nature of the problems, the parties responsible, and the preferred solutions of the source with those of the targets, or those of the intermediaries that might 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 their 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." Among those factors was the nature and extent of information that subsidy providers were able to gather about the similarities and differences between targets and the others through whom messages, information and frames would pass along the way. Personal information and its importance to the production of political influence was examined with regard to privacy and the reproduction of inequality (Gandy, 1993, 2009).

Because framing is generally thought about as a process, even though considerable attention has been focused on the nature and origins of the frames that we rely upon in developing our own assessments of problems and their potential solutions, some have argued that framing theory has yet to reach its ideal state as a scholarly or practical resource (Entman, 1993). Despite those still relevant concerns, this paper will still argue in support of initiating a coordinated effort to frame inequality as a crisis that simply has to be addressed. And it will be argued that the mass media audience will have to be actively involved in the development and implementation of this campaign.

Engaging the audience

The past few years have seen a most impressive increase in the amount of attention being paid to Dallas Smythe's contributions to our thinking about media audiences. Particular attention 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. An excellent collection of some of this thinking has been organized and published by McGuigan and Manzerolle (2014). Another collection of articles about digital labor was also recently published in *TripleC*, where an especially insightful article (Nixon, 2014) extended Smythe's reflections on the notion of audience labor as work performed under the control of capitalists that involved learning to consume, to include other interests involved in the production of consciousness.

In addition 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 an important dimension of audience labor is that which should be seen as an investment in the development of different forms of capital that remain largely under the control of labor. Fuchs and Sandoval (2014: 501-502) note the importance of the kinds of labor in which the "patriarchal family" is a mode of production, largely performed within the household, where the labor that is unwaged is applied to 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."

The work that members of family units do within their households is important because of the myriad ways through which the use values generated through the process of 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 we face, both theoretically and pragmatically is that of separating the work that we do for capital from the work that we do in our own interests as we make use of commercial and other mass media content.

I certainly don't intend to 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 that are interspersed throughout broadcast programs. We readily understand this process of making sense as being a critical aspect of the generation of demand for different commodities.

However, it is also particularly important for us to recognize that not all of the advertisements or messages that 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. A great many others are messages designed to persuade us to support or oppose

public policies or governmental actions that corporate interests see as threats to the bottom line.

In addition, the notion that audience members are working for, or investing in the development of their *own capabilities* is one that invites us *to at least consider* that part of the literature of communication that we'd find under the banner of "information-seeking." Important work in this area has been focused on the relationship between information-seeking and a variety of constraints that lead us to doubt that the so-called "free marketplace of ideas" provides the kind of universal service to democracy that many would have us to believe (Dervin, 1994). Media audiences might also be understood to be working in an effort to expand their stocks of economic, social, cultural, symbolic (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1999), and arguably, even political capital if we count the political work that is done in the making of classes (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), including those that are as flimsy as the contracts between media firms and those of us working as audiences, is often limited still further as a result of political actions taken by organized members of the working class.

However, my interest in the household and the role of the family in the reproduction of labor power is driven in large part by the realization that there are a great many constraints that limit the ability of members of some family units to make productive use of the resources available within the family, in the marketplace, or within the neighborhood. These are concerns about economic, social and political inequality and the nature of its reproduction across time (Gandy, 2009). While most of the factors shaping our "life chances" (Dahrendorf, 1979) are under the control of powerful others, there is no denying the role played by decisions made within the household. Many of those choices have to do with use of the media and other sources of information.

At one time in the U.S., and other Western nations there was a great deal of attention being paid to the amount, character and quality of the media being consumed within households. Concern about the influence of violent television programming in the 1960s in the U.S. led to an investigation of exposure and its effects. This initial work was followed in the early 1970s by a rash of studies under the leadership of the 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 safety zone. 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 role that might be played by parents in mediating the antisocial effects of exposure (Gerbner and Gross, 1976) 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, actually making their way through dinner. It also seems likely that 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 interaction with family members.

More critically, however, the differences between households in terms of the availability and use of content within this expanded media stream soon come to be talked about 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 were expected to follow widening gaps discussed in terms of access to information. These gaps were not limited to those associated with the inability to pay for access to subscriber-financed channels. Consumer segmentation was seen to be generating class distinctions based on remotely accessible evidence of disparities in communications competence defined as the ability “to understand and to be understood” (Gandy, 1988: 108).

These differences in capability were also understood 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 rather dramatically. These costs are expected to rise even more dramatically as more and more services migrate to the internet, and become difficult to acquire through traditional pathways (Wilson III and Costanza-Chock, 2012).

From what we’ve learned about the strategic management of newsfeeds by Facebook, we might still come to discover that capitalist control over media use and sense making has increased, and perhaps, 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 the social learning that is involved in the development of the *core values and beliefs* that guide our actions. While the influence of parents over the values of their children declines with age, and with the influence of peers, there is no denying the importance of parental, and therefore household influence over the development and reproduction of attitudes about others.

Still, I think we would want to include within our examination of household production are the kinds of quality learning, or investments in the development of competence where the individual is actually *intending* to become a better, more valuable worker by taking courses, and studying at home. I think we also would want to include the forms of social learning through which these individuals become better human beings.

Inequality and capabilities

Differences in communicative competence are especially problematic in the context of an approach toward inequality associated with Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen (Sen and Foster, 1997). Because his attention has primarily been focused on those situated on the bottom rungs of a society's economic and social status ladder, Sen's "capabilities" approach shares an important connection with the approach to equality put forward by John Rawls' (1971) *Theory of Justice*.

Sen's work is a focused engagement with theoretical challenges within welfare economics that engage directly with the problems of interpersonal comparisons of value; comparisons that appear to be required by most attempts at evaluating public policies. Sen's approach is primarily concerned about the nature of opportunity and its distribution throughout society. It is not simply about access to resources, but it is about the ability of individuals to make use of those resources, including sets of core rights that would enable individuals to successfully engage in activities that contribute to the quality of their lives.

Among those rights is a set related to the use of information. Access to information depends in part 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 the capability of understanding develops. But, as we have noted, access to, and the ability to make efficient use of digital information systems also plays an increasingly important role in sense-making (Britz, et al., 2012). And lest we forget, bias and constraint in the supply of information that is in fact relevant and therefore potentially useful to readers also serves to further limit the development of capabilities in this regard.

Because early applications of Sen's theory have been applied primarily in the context of developing economies, there is special value to be derived from studies of capabilities that explore its application within the environments of wealthier European nations (Hobson, 2011). Some of the difficulties involved in measuring the nature of capabilities and the functionings they enable us to achieve have to do with the nature of constraints, some of which 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 appropriate.

Among the points of value in this approach that is relevant to our concerns about coming to terms with inequality is the ease with which analysts are able to develop "capability sets" that include institutional individual, and societal factors (Hobson, 2011: 158-162) that would permit analysts to identify the kinds of institutional settings enabling the conversion of rights into capabilities, as well as those that might 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 neighborhoods and the reproduction of labor power

No doubt you have encountered the claim that “it takes a village to raise a child.” This reflects part of our recognition of the important role that a neighborhood, 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 rather dramatically by the neighborhood or location of a household (Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2000).

Of course, much of what we know about the influence of the neighborhood, as discussed within the literature as “the neighborhood effect,” has been limited primarily 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 members of families, and as participants in neighborhood schools, where they interact with their peers, is where their *identities* are formed (Chetty et al., 2015).

It is important to understand how race, ethnicity and class helps to shape identities in communities that are increasingly becoming more homogenous, or segregated along these lines. But again, that part of the literature that emphasizes the negative influence of the neighborhood on the disadvantaged segments of the population generally begins with the development of models of cumulative disadvantage which focus on the characteristics of the household, while ignoring the structural influences on the opportunity sets that are available within those neighborhoods (Gandy, 2009).

For example, developmental research that demonstrates that differences in cognitive ability across neighborhoods that barely exist at nine months of age, are already quite significant by the time these youngsters celebrate their second birthday (Fryer and Levitt, 2013; Lynch, 2015). This means, of course, that the home environment is especially critical to the development of inequality. The household is also where youngsters need access to resources like books, toys, games and the kinds of conversations that are inputs in the development of a set of capabilities that will establish each youngster’s pathway to the future. Lower income families have less of the time or the money that access to these resources requires these days.

Of course, in some neighborhoods, other sets of sociocultural and behavioral skills are developed through social interaction, including play that contributes to the advantages middle class children receive as they make their way through schooling (Putnam, 2015). However, because of the rise of “play 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 that have been shown to be 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 all of these concerns about the reproduction of labor power. Thus, when we think about the household as a site of social reproduction, we are thinking about information as an input, or a resource used in the production or reproduction of labor power. However, I am suggesting that we also need to think about this information as an investment that families and individuals make in the development of those different sorts of capital that Bourdieu (1986) and others suggest we help to develop, or acquire.

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 a role for the choices that individuals and families make with regard to social reproduction, they underscore the importance of recognizing the differences between the contributions made by schooling, and that which is developed within the household and community. In addition, they remind us of the critical role that human capital formation plays 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 approach within ongoing debates about the role that education might play in addressing the problem of inequality (Walker, 2011). While the human capital approach promises economic growth as a byproduct of expanded educational attainment, the growth in economic inequality points to a serious shortcoming in the results of following that model.

Social capital might be considered to be the form of capital most closely associated with households and the neighborhoods in which they exist. Among the various capitals associated with the contributions made by Bourdieu (1987, 1989) and others (Cooper, 2008), social capital appears to have claimed center stage with regard to the role of civic engagement (Putnam, 2003) and social cohesion as factors related to and upward mobility (Prewitt et al., 2014). Like human capital, social capital is distinguished from economic capital because it is not depleted through use, but through a lack of use (Prewitt et al., 2014: 42).

Political capital

Political capital has not captured the same level of attention that social, economic, or even cultural capital have attracted. But because capital is to be understood in terms of the power associated with it, its application in the realm of politics and in the production of influence over the activities of governments, it deserves its own means of 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 are involved in the development of social capital networks and alliances.

Like cultural and social capital, political capital accumulation is said to involve the development and use of particular social skills, as well as the capability to convince others to come together in the service of a common goal that might be achieved in the field of political action (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 to be 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 community empowerment often defined in terms of capabilities such as those in evidence 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 as well as by individual residents is both a reflection and a reification of the power that these stakeholders have gained as a result of political engagement over the years (Shepherd and Bowler, 1997). Its growth may also be seen as a response to rising frustration over the challenges of governing (Newman, et al., 2004).

Other observers suggest that changes in the nature of the communications infrastructure make it easier for the average person to communicate with an elected official, or engage in other forms of political activity such as signing a petition (De Zúñiga, et al., 2010), and as a result, the levels of political engagement have increased. What remains to be determined, of course, is the extent to which this engagement can be seen to be effective as a means of achieving policy relevant goals, without opening new pathways for the pursuit of strategic advantage that some might identify as corruption.

While it was not possible for these researchers to determine the causal relationship between the use of social media as an information source, the fact that information seeking was directly related to civic and political participation is noteworthy (De Zúñiga, et al., 2012). Of particular interest is the suggestion that the news that consumers acquire through social media is “filtered by people whom SNS users trust and relate to” may explain why that information would have a greater impact on the consumers’ political participation (De Zúñiga, et al., 2012: 331).

Efforts to understand the nature of political capital and its geographic distribution nearly always raise questions about the role played by race (Hersh and Nall, 2015). By identifying Democrats with a policy of economic redistribution, Hersh and Nall make use of a data set containing all 73 million registered voters in the U.S. states that record political party designation as part of the registration process. They find that the relationship between income and party registration (or partisanship in their formulation) tends to vary as a function of racial concentrations. They report: "Very Republican high-income districts and very Democratic low-income districts appear only in states with high-poverty minority areas (Hersh and Nall, 2015: 6). However, there are striking differences to be seen within the South, and in the West Coast and the Northeast Corridor. Here they find that "rich voters in racially diverse districts are, on average, almost as Democratic as poor voters" (p.12).

Even researchers in China have explored the development and exploitation of political capital by commercial firms in the context of an emerging market economy (Nee and Oppen, 2010). They suggest that the value of political capital is likely to decline as state control over resource distribution gives way to determination by market forces. While the data used in their analysis supports this conclusion in the Chinese case, it is still the case that substantial amounts of economic, social, and symbolic capital continue to be invested in the production of influence over government policy in the U.S. and other mature market economies. The challenge becomes one of determining what the nature of the returns to expenditures of political capital actually are in relation to government policies that would otherwise limit the options they face in those markets.

Although theirs is not an attempt to associate political influence with expenditures of political capital, or any other kind of capital, Gilens and Page (2014: 575-576) set out to test the leading theories about the nature of political power. 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." In addition, they suggest that the preferences of affluent citizens have a greater impact on policy change than the preferences of the average citizen. They raise a key question about the ability of these elites to shape mass opinion, but they are unable to answer this one with the same level of confidence.

Kelly and Enns (2010) have struggled with this issue by studying how the preferences of the wealthy and the poor appear to respond to changes in income inequality. Somewhat curiously, they note that of late, both the rich and the poor appear to become more conservative as income inequality increases. That is, "when inequality rises, both the rich and the poor respond by asking for less government" (Kelly and Enns, 2010: 865-868). Unfortunately, they don't explore the possibility that the control exercised by these elites over the media and the framing of governance issues could lead to this counter-intuitive change in public opinion, although they do suggest that they "think it is possible that the way information about distributional outcomes is framed is important." These researchers face a

common problem: social scientists have simply not invested much in the exploration of the relationship between media consumption and perceptions of inequality (Friedland, et al., 2012: 288). And fewer still have examined the way the problem of inequality has been framed within the media or within the environments in which related policies are formed.

Policy formation

As noted earlier, there is already quite a substantial literature on the nature and impact of *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. A much smaller bit of scholarly attention has been focused on the *indirect* paths that go through non-governmental organization or interest groups rather than through professional lobbyists. Even less attention is being focused on the strategic communications that are delivered through the mass media that either reaches policymakers that way, or more indirectly still, through engaged citizens, or through representations of their views as estimated through public opinion surveys.

Although considerable public attention and protest followed the decision by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Citizens United v. FEC* (Epstein, 2011; Feingold, 2012), the impact of this decision with regard to corporate contributions to election campaigns was merely the most recent addition to the ability of corporations to influence public policy as providers of information subsidies in their role as “speakers” with First Amendment rights (Kerr, 2008; Piety, 2012). The fact that the Court’s decision did not have much of an impact on 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 influence because we believe that political actors are likely to “apply a grain of salt” to messages for which the identity and interests of the message’s source are obvious. Thus, when the true source of a message is hidden, because it has been delivered through a “trusted” source like a newspaper, or an even more highly trusted source, like an expert at a university or an independent research center, far less of that cognitive salt is usually applied.

In a limited case study of elite attempts to engage in what was referred to as a “knowledge-shaping process” a variety of attempts to use trusted sources was observed. They identified the Perchlorate Study Group that was something like, but not precisely like a think tank. In their case, this study group’s purpose “is not so much to generate policy proposals, but to generate scientific research and fund experts, who attempt to appear unaffiliated, to produce particular knowledges and to contest competing claims” (Bonds, 2010: 435).

In addition to concerns about bias associated with conflicts of interest, or divided loyalties, there is also likely to be some assessment of the credibility, or authoritative legitimacy of the source. This means that in some 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 nature of the news business that has made journalists even more dependent upon well-crafted information subsidies, of the kind that professional public relations people are *reliably* able to provide. Journalists have less time to do much in the way of research, and because their writing is being subject to evaluation in terms of audience attention and engagement, and value, often almost in real time, journalists need sources that can provide stories likely to capture the attention of the right audiences, without risking the primary goals of the marketers who are engaged in competitive bidding for access to the *attention* that has been produced.

At the same time, changes in the new media environment appear to have influenced the way public relations practitioners are pitching stories to members of the media. The most significant change appears to be with regard to the rate at which bloggers are being used within a process called “media catching.” These connections between journalists and interested sources are 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).

The nature of this relational shift may not be predictive of a shift in control away from those providing subsidies, although there is something of an alteration in the initiation of contact between sources and targets. Somewhat surprisingly, mainstream media organizations appear to be the most active players in this new delivery system. These researchers’ analysis is consistent with the general impression we have of a news processing system where “journalists, reporters, or bloggers are assigned a news story by an editor or producer, they may not have the contacts necessary to obtain that information in a quick manner” (Waters, et al., 2010: 256). It is not clear whether the need to wait until a request comes close to matching the segmentation and targeting goals of the public relations specialist will result in a loss of influence, or a simply a modification in response strategies.

Protest

Protests are also information subsidies. Sometimes they are direct when they take place within the sight or hearing of their targets, but most often, they are indirect in that they depend upon the news media to capture, frame, and redistribute the messages their demonstrations or other protests were meant to convey. Even riots of the kind most recently unfolding in the streets of Baltimore following the death of another African American 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 at some level, a strategic expression of social discontent or dissatisfaction. As Gilje (1996: 6) puts it, "Riots are moments when people in the street... make themselves heard and reveal how they interact with others in society." And Gilje insists that these activities are rational, "riotous crowd 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" (Gilje, 1996: 7).

Protests, unlike text based information subsidies generally don't have the same potential for shaping how the published stories represent the perspectives or frames that the protesters would prefer. In an analysis of *New York Times* coverage of the Occupy Wall Street protest, Gottlieb (2015) suggested that a variety of professional and structural concerns resulted in changes over time in the frames used to tell the Occupy story. He offered the protesters some credit for providing a unique identity meme (99%) that could be used throughout the campaign. Somewhat consistent with a long-standing journalistic tradition, early frames emphasizing economics soon gave way to conflict frames in the later stages of the "issue attention cycle" (Gottlieb: 2015: 17-18). While protesters may be able to get their share of "ink" by feeding the media's taste for conflict, they are far less likely to get their issues presented with similar levels of success.

Framing

As suggested earlier, the focus in this paper is on the power, or effectiveness of frames as resources in the production of influence over public policies, especially those with the potential to reduce, and eventually reverse the growth in social, economic and political inequality within society.

Framing refers to the organization and structure of arguments used to 1) identify the problem, 2) to identify the parties that are responsible for that problem, and 3) to identify the solutions (and their rationales or justifications) that are most appropriate in bringing about change at the cognitive, affective, and behavioral levels.

Framing, as a strategy for the production of influence is also understood to involve choosing the right pathway or channel for delivering information to the appropriate policy actors. Sometimes those pathways are thought about as devices and networks, but most of the time those pathways are other people, defined in institutional terms.

For example, most of the work on framing, and information subsidies is focused on *journalists* working in various parts of the rapidly evolving digital media environment. Some, but not enough of that work focuses on the *sources* of information that journalists have come to rely upon as they struggle to meet dramatically shortened deadlines.

Framing is also about the choice of the right structuring of messages in order to improve the chances that the message will be understood as it was intended. For example, we have learned that without changing the underlying facts, the way we frame “comparative risk,” or inequality has a powerful impact on how people will understand the problem and the proposed solutions (Bigman, 2014; Gandy and Li, 2005).

We’ve also discovered that it matters whether we say African Americans earn 25% *less* than whites, or Whites earn 25% *more* than African Americans. Social psychologists suggest that the *target* of the comparison *triggers* a whole set of associated links to *stereotypes* we have about that group. Many of those associations lead people to assign blame, or responsibility to the *victims* for any of the hardships they suffer.

Framing for a social movement

Benford and Snow’s (2000: 613) contributions to our thinking about framing have been especially important with regard to the use of frames by social movement organizations (SMOs). Their identification of “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.” These frames are collective because of the highly interactive process through which these frames are developed for strategic use within political struggles, primarily as aids to the mobilization of supporters, but also as challenges to the authority and influence of opponents or antagonists.

Scholars working within the disciplines of sociology and political science have helped to characterize different kinds of frames on the basis of the functions they serve within SMS mobilization campaigns. Among the most common frame types are those that support the identification of problems and the assignment of blame or responsibility. These are referred to as “diagnostic frames.” Closely related frames that Benford and Snow characterize as prognostic, are designed to answer the familiar question: What is to be done?” The motivational frames are closely related, especially with regard to the extent that those frames clarify and reinforce the sense of injustice associated with the victimization of identifiable segments of the population (Benford and Snow, 2000: 615-617; Gamson, 1992: 31-58).

Benford and Snow (2000) and others (Schaffner and Sellers, 2010) make it clear that the production and distribution of collective action frames is not a simple straight-forward process that could be specified in some policy and procedures manual of the sort common within industrial manufacturing plants. There are any number of internal and external constraints, including those related to what has

been characterized as the “political opportunity structure” (Benford and Snow, 2000: 628-629).

Even more difficult is the assessment of the success of these efforts in reaching identifiable goals or policy outcomes (Bleich, 2011). Rather than generalizable assessments of the success of SMO campaigns, the best we have are selected descriptions of campaigns and their relationship to legislative victories, and changes in policies and practices over time that are 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 the success or failure of these “framing contests” is rooted in the fact that for most policy concerns, there is rarely a definitive end point; the struggles just continue with a different set of frames and organizations (Froud, et al., 2012).

It is probably clear by now that inequality is the issue that is central to my scholarly and political agenda. Economic, social and political inequality are all very closely linked. I know that “intersectionality” is a concept with considerable traction within the academy these days, so that it is certainly important to consider the many ways that the categories of race, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation intersect with the causes and consequences of inequality.

Let me be clear here. Not everyone agrees that inequality is a problem; many believe that inequality is simply a fact of nature, it always has been, and will continue to be so in the future. This is especially true for economic inequality. Indeed, rather than seeing it as a problem, some believe that inequality provides a motivation, a social nudge that leads people to invest in the development of their own capabilities so that they can compete more effectively in the marketplace.

Still the public response to the publication in English of Thomas Piketty’s massive critical engagement with *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2014) suggests that many believe 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). A special issue of a journal of the World Economics Association devoted an entire issue to Piketty’s book (<http://www.paecon.net/PAEReview/issue69/whole69.pdf>).

Even before Piketty’s explosion on the scene, an increasing number of scholars have come to believe that inequality has developed into problem a serious global problem. In part as a result of this growing concern, we have seen an increase in domestic and comparative studies designed to examine the relationship between income inequality and other measures of the quality of life including the relationships between people, and between people and their governments.

Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett make it quite clear in their examination of *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 (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009). While the greatest differences in the quality of life may be seen for those at the bottom, greater equality also benefits those nearer the top.

These studies are motivated by a belief that inequality is not just a problem for the poor that don't have reliable access to the necessities of life. Inequality is also believed to be a problem for societies as a whole, at least within the worlds being constructed by economists and statisticians (Stiglitz, 2012).

Higher levels of inequality also seem to be negatively associated with different kinds of tolerance, such as tolerance for people of other races, ethnicities, sexual identities, or political ideology. These indicators of tolerance seem to be closely associated with measures of interpersonal trust, which also varies indirectly with economic inequality.

If the strongest association between inequality and well-being is with various measures of health, it becomes important to understand what the underlying processes actually are. It doesn't take much research, or even much imagination to think about how sources of stress and anxiety might rise with economic inequality. Certainly we can imagine the kinds of stress that are generated by continuous exposure to commercials urging us to spend money we don't have, to buy things we don't really need, in order to meet the expectations of people we really don't know.

Many of us believe that these kinds of pressures to consume were at the heart of the Great Recession, when countless millions went into crushing debt in an effort to consume at the rate that mainstream and social media indicated was a norm they ought to achieve. One suggestion that I think of as being particularly important is based on the observation that "societies where incomes are relatively equal have low levels of stress, and high levels of trust."

The challenge of framing inequality as a problem

Once again, let me be clear. I am not driven by some naïve assumption about how deliberative democracy works. We doubt that it proceeds along the lines of an idealized communicative interaction where we all swear to be guided by Habermasian commitments to fair play (Habermas, 1990).

Politics are not like that, even in the best of times. But ideas do matter; public opinion is an operational constraint that even Supreme Court justices pay attention to. What I am suggesting, therefore, is 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 merely to frame inequality as a problem worthy of public intervention, but it is also essential to provide an analysis of the causes of inequality. Generally, this means identifying the factors, including specific actors, or categories of actors who are responsible for the patterns and trends we have observed in relation to the rise and fall of inequality and its consequences.

This also means that actors and institutions that have the *responsibility*, and the *capability* to take corrective action has to be identified. And finally, for completeness, this strategic framing will have to present the actions and the rationales behind those actions that we believe will have the greatest potential for achieving our policy goals.

Identifying the Responsible actors

Identifying the actors who bear the primary responsibility for the inequalities in income and wealth that have been the focus of so much media attention in recent years is a serious, and difficult problem. Certainly we could say in general terms 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 general terms are not enough. We need to be able to specify the actions taken (or not taken) that have resulted in the establishment of these constraints on the distribution of income and the accumulation and transfer of wealth. We might be able to identify the legislators, bureaucrats and jurists in terms of the votes they have cast, and the opinions they have expressed in support of, or in opposition to the policies we might be able to identify as increasing inequality. But it is far more difficult, while not impossible, to identify and characterize members of the public, especially those in the top one percent in terms of the financial support they may have allocated to these decision-makers within the government.

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 move the moveable in the right direction.

Unfortunately, the information and arguments or frames are likely to vary rather dramatically across policy proposals. This is a problem in part because almost every important bill being considered by some legislative body is likely to have an impact on inequality. Of course, some bills are more easily identified as likely to have a negative impact.

The research dimension

My thinking in this regard has been influenced to a great extent by an organization composed primarily of communications researchers who specialize in the analysis

of frames, and the assessment of *which* frames are more likely to be effective in relation to a variety of social problems. I am referring to the *FrameWorks Institute* (www.frameworksinstitute.org). The Institute was one of nine nonprofit organizations that received MacArthur Foundation awards for Creative and Effective Institutions in 2015. The Foundation made specific reference to the success that FrameWorks has had in developing key terms and phrases that help 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 nonprofit environmental groups as well as the Environmental Protection Agency as a way to help people understand the effect of greenhouse gases on climate change (MacArthur Foundation, 2015).

Part of what FrameWorks does involves characterizing dominant and competing public values and opinions around a number of core issues that concern progressives. They have actually registered a trademark for the approach that they call “Strategic Frame Analysis.” They issue periodic “message briefs” on specific topics that provide guidance for policy activists, including one about “talking about disparities” (Davey, 2009).

This approach involves content analysis of the mass media to identify the dominant frames associated with one of their key issues. They do intensive interviews with members of the public to understand what they call the “default cultural models” that people use when trying to make sense of a social problem. This well-planned research enterprise even includes experimental surveys that are used in order to determine which frames trigger, or activate dominant, but unhelpful cognitive frames, and which ones trigger more progressive, transformative frames. An excellent example of this strategy is outlined in their discussion of the challenges involved in addressing the array of problems in educational reform. Of course, equity concerns are critical element in what they call the “swamp” of education (Bales and O’Neil, 2014).

The Frameworks approach is one that is heavily dependent upon extensive research, primarily funded by foundations that are willing to support the development of progressive alternatives to social problems.

While the Institute has been quite successful in evaluating the impact of their carefully developed message frames at the cognitive and affective level, it is not yet clear how successful these efforts are at the level of policy formation and change. Nor is it clear how important these contributions have been as aids to the mobilization of public support for the development of programs of intervention (Manuel, 2011).

Identifying the solutions

Some of the lessons that we have learned through reflecting on the movement against neoliberalism and globalization suggest that we will face considerable difficulty in coming up with prognostic frames supporting actions that will address the problems we have collected under the umbrella of inequality. Some of the struggle over the development of rationales for actions also involves decisions about where strategic attention should be focused: local, national or international scales. Somewhat more problematically, we also have to decide whether the focus should be at the legislative, judicial, or administrative levels of governmental activity.

The political science literature directs our attention to what they call the “political opportunity structure,” and the need to determine where in the policy infrastructure do we see the greatest possibility for affecting change through the production of influence (Benford and Snow, 2000).

Appropriate tax policy would mean a reduction in the taxes that harm the already disadvantaged, such as taxes on the consumption of the necessities of life. It might also mean raising taxes on capital investment, especially those producing speculative “capital gains,” while providing special tax breaks for social investment. However, each of these options raises concerns about the nature of public support for redistribution (Ashok, et al., 2015).

Tax oriented solutions are especially important at the state, or provincial level, because it is here where social benefits that do the most to reduce inequality are being underfunded because the wealthy elites not only made more money than most, they were also able to shelter more of it from taxes, leaving local and regional social budgets in dire straits, unable to finance important social services, including education (Roemer, 2011). Rather than framing our appeals in terms of taxing rich people, many think our focus ought to be on taxing the corporations, and reducing their ability to avoid existing taxes (McIntyre, et al., 2011).

There are a great many proposals that are being offered as a way to narrow the gaps between 90th and 10th percentiles in income and wealth. A great many of them smell to me like victim blaming. More education and training is at the top of those lists (Hershbein, et al., 2015).

I am not opposed to expanding access to education. Indeed, it seems clear to me that there is no way to reduce the educational gap without redirecting local tax policies in order to improve the quality and performance of the schools that are failing to prepare those near the bottom to take advantage of opportunities for higher education.

With education as a central focus, it should be possible to take advantage of the special place that children have in our sense of which segments of the population are seen as most worthy of attention and support. Children lead the list. Children are the least likely to be blamed for their circumstances. However, just because children are valuable targets for support, this doesn't mean that we are ready to give their

parents, or maybe even their schools the money and resources that would be needed to alter their life chances. This is a challenge we will have to address head on.

There have certainly been suggestions about the role that improvements in criminal justice policy can play in removing many of the sources of disadvantage that affect poor and minority communities (Travis and Western 2014). Moving in this direction will mean direct engagements with the prison-industrial-complex, where private commercial firms have contracts with counties and states within the US that establish guaranteed occupancy rates.

As I have suggested, careful and innovative research efforts will also have to play a central role in helping us to 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 for being *studied* as an option, despite such a proposal having been introduced by Representative John Conyers at every session of Congress for the past 25 years (Coates, 2014). The challenge, of course, is one of framing whatever options we develop as being at *least* being worthy of discussion.

Evaluating the productivity of frames

Much of the work evaluating information subsidies, including the influence of frames has been focused on success at the cognitive and affective levels; substantially less has been focused at the legislative or judicial level. What we need from the perspective of political economy is an assessment of the productivity of frames at the level of mainstream and alternative media, within the official communications at the legislative and judicial level, and within the communications flows of supporters and challengers within SMOs.

Part of the challenge of choosing the right frames to use as indirect subsidies is to determine the most effective way of attracting the attention of journalists or other gatekeepers who are increasingly being guided by, if not actually being replaced by algorithms designed to maximize access and engagement of valued audience members (Gandy, 2012; Nguyen, 2013). Napoli (2014: 349) 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.” What Napoli sees here is a tension between the bottom line and traditional news values.

Some story ideas, especially those involving racial disparity will face considerable media resistance. While the standard governing the selection of stories in the past dealt with some assessment of “newsworthiness,” journalistic decision-making these days is increasingly focused on the bottom line. One study examined

standards of newsworthiness among health journalists and discovered that the old standard of “if it bleeds it leads” still applies to stories about racial disparities in health, in that stories about progress in reducing those disparities tended to be rated poorly (Hinnant, et al., 2011). Of particular interest in this particular study is the fact that out of a large number of components of what journalists take into account in evaluating a story, their sense of it’s “publishability” was the most important dimension. Unfortunately, however, journalistic standards associated with the public interest seem likely to play a subordinate role in the near future (Pickard, 2015).

Another challenge relates to the need to develop analytical approaches appropriate to the rapidly changing media environment that involves a variety of different web based media platforms. For the analyses of Twitter and mainstream news media online web crawler analyses of hyperlinks over time might provide the possibility of assessing the impact of planned campaigns. At the same time, there is a need to develop campaign strategies on the basis of assessments of the political and policy impact of frames distributed through these platforms in the past (Guggenheim, et al., 2015).

A recent report from the Pew Research Center (Smith, et al., 2014) provided an assessment of political discourse on Twitter. After recognizing that Twitter users were a comparatively small segment of the adult population and of internet users in general, the fact that they were especially attentive to public discourse about political issues, while often having public opinions at odds with those of the general public, the fact that they sorted themselves into “distinct partisan camps” made them especially worthy of study (Smith et al., 2014: 1).

Their analytical approach, one reflective of the strategies associated with “big data” and “computational linguistics” locates individuals within the “web of relationships” that develops as issues are played out within this platform. The Pew report focuses on six Twitter “maps” of the “crowds” or clusters that emerged from their analyses. They suggest that these maps can not only help us understand the changing role of social media within society, but 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 includes the identification of individuals who used the same terms or phrases, the identification of policy relevant frames is quite easily accomplished. The primary concern about this particular use of Twitter data is that the “snapshots” of data were not compared over time, although they do note that such analyses would be possible (Smith, et al., 2014: 33).

Such an approach would represent a substantial improvement over the expensive and time-consuming enterprise of data gathering through interviews of journalists and editors, but it is clearly not a substitute for that kind of research, especially if it provides information about how tweets influence these gatekeepers’ decisions about how to frame an issue (Parmlee, 2013). Again, 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. Unsurprisingly, despite indicating their routine utilization of these subsidies in their constructions of the news, journalists continue to deny that these tweets, like the press releases they continue to receive are not very influential. The fact that they actually quote tweets within their stories, however, suggests that there would be value in mapping the paths through which influential frames make their way in and through the policy formation system (Tufekci, 2014a).

Without the resources needed to design and execute massive data-based analysis of social media interactions and associate them with attempts to engage in the reframing of arguments about the nature of, and solutions to particular dimensions of the problem of inequality, it would still be possible to explore the temporal relationship between informational campaigns and their reflections in major media outlets. With a bit more work, it should be possible to extend that analysis to publically available legislative and judicial content.

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 charting the rise and fall of words and phrases that appear in the newspaper over time. It is possible to compare similar terms, such as poverty and inequality to see how poverty continues to dominate the discussion within that newspaper, and probably within the US more generally.

Google is actively facilitating researchers interested in using their resource and its database for their own investigations (<http://storage.googleapis.com/books/ngrams/books/datasetsv2.html>).

It should be possible to update the claims made by Etzioni (1988: 217-236) regarding the impact of efforts to influence government decisions on the performance of firms within the marketplace. Etzioni associated the forms of market power derived from concentration or monopoly status to the forms of “interventionist power” derived from the ability to influence government decisions.

While he noted the importance of intervention by individual firms, he suggested that the coordination of strategic interventions by coalitions mobilizing resources in support of common interests was far more influential. He recognized that there are limitations to the intra-market benefits that corporations derive through investments in the production of influence on the government. However, he also believed that the returns on those investments tended to be substantial, often greater than the returns on research and development or 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 would enable the assessment of the efficiency and effectiveness of various strategies for the reframing of debates about the nature of the problem of inequality and the policies and programs that should be initiated to reduce its extent and its impact in society. The insights derived from this investigative effort should be fed back into the development of a program of coordinated political intervention.

Moral and Ethical Concerns

In addition to the problems involving technology, methodology and access to the data needed to relate information subsidies to public discourse and policy action, there are also problems related to the need to make decisions about how these subsidies should to be delivered within the new media environment.

Although I have been quite critical in the past about the consequences for democracy that flow from the segmentation of audiences in order to deliver targeted messages (Gandy, 2009, 2013), I have been struggling more of late about the implications are of telling different stories, or making different appeals to an expanded variety of audience segments that could be made “visible” through use of the same technologies of surveillance that I have criticized in the past.

I have tried to find some comfort in the distinctions drawn by a former colleague, Ed Baker, who has drawn distinctions between *corrupt* and what I would call *authentic* segmentation (Baker, 2002). Baker 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 have to admit that 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 way. I am troubled by my own 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).

I can certainly appreciate the importance of subaltern oppositional groups coming together, in private, to develop their own understanding of the issues. I even understand that struggles over frames will take up considerable time and effort in the building of the kinds of coalitions that moving this complex of issues forward will require. 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 be at the base of our justifications for acting in one way rather than another.

At the same time, I believe this issue of inequality is simply too critically important for me to continue sticking my head 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 in actually asking them in the first place. Indeed, because it is still illegal or impractical to ask some questions, it makes more sense, as long as the models have achieved an acceptable level of accuracy to infer what the answers are likely to be from already existing information. 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 are now routinely engaging in real time experiments with their massive number of users (Manjoo, 2014). And, although there are the 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 these projects in order to assess 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 the resources and target them at population segments that have the greatest potential to influence the policy system.

I agree that the challenges that have to be met in forming and sustaining a coalition, and moving toward consensus may involve providing different rationales or explanations that resonate with different population segments based on their own deeply held values, as well as their concrete social experiences. I understand that part of the decision about when and where to focus resources involves an assessment of which investments are likely to be most productive. Such a determination might be based on the identification of which groups are most likely to support both the goals and the strategies of a particular initiative.

The *Opportunity Agenda* (2014) has used cluster analysis to identify and characterize six categories people within the U.S. population in terms of their being likely support such an effort to reduce inequality and expand opportunity. The *core catalysts*, some 19 percent of the adult population they identify as being most committed to these goals, are made up primarily of racial and ethnic minorities, political liberals and unmarried women. These are the people who are most likely to have experienced what they see as unfair treatment, and the ones who are most

willing to take action to address it. The *resistants*, on the other hand, are some 10 percent of the population. Most of this cluster are married men and Republicans who don't 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. Not surprisingly, the only group for which social class is a prominent feature of the cluster is that of the primary supporters. Some 56 percent of the people within that cluster say that they are "less than middle class," but not poor. This would seem to argue against using self-identification of class status or position as a basis for choosing initial targets for involvement in a movement for change.

Here again, political economists 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.

We need to get started now.

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