# Public sphere, alternative media and social involvement in Belarus:  The role of an individual in history

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### Abstract

Radical media plays a vital role in initiating political changes in totalitarian societies (Hong, 1998; Downing, 2001), by promoting media literacy, and acting as a catalyst to forming social identities among people. Unlike in democratic societies, people living under the totalitarian government are unable to form pressure groups or otherwise voice their concerns to their government (Downing, 2001). As going against the *status quo* places them at a constant risk of political repression. Moreover, most citizens lack media literacy skills that are critical to assessing the biases hidden in pro-government propaganda (Rose, 1998). This essay discusses the utmost importance of the formation and active development of what Jürgen Habermas refers to as "the public sphere." This essay sets out to prove that active public participation in the political process is a necessary element of initializing a socio-political reform within totalitarian societies. Underground media outlets are specifically highlighted as promoters of anti-hegemonic codes of the authoritarian rule as radical media can reach out to international governments and NGOs, and bring their attention to the human rights violations. Concerned international players are then able to use financial sanctions and political negotiations to demand cessation of human rights violations.

**Keywords**: Underground media, Totalitarian Societies, Oppressive Government, Socio-Political Paradigm Shift, Freedom of the Press

# Public sphere, alternative media and social involvement in Belarus: The role of an individual in history

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## Introduction

Radical media plays a vital role in initiating political change in totalitarian societies. It does so by promoting media literacy and acting as a catalyst to form social identities among people (Hong, 1998; Downing, 2001). Unlike in democratic countries, where the public can lobby the government, the extent of political activism is greatly restricted in totalitarian societies (Downing, 2001; Rose, 1998). As a result, the formation of a public sphere under a dictatorship is a long and challenging process. In this paper, I argue that active radical media is an essential, in the process of public sphere formation. The theoretical works of Noam Chomsky, Jürgen Habermas, and John Downing outline how radical media can mobilize public sphere into existence. Once the public sphere is formed, it can elicit an international resonance by appealing to NGOs and international governments whose decisions are beyond the reach of the watchdogs of

the totalitarian state. The case of Belarus, an ex-Soviet country bordering Russia, will be used as an example to discuss possible challenges to alternative media outlets in a totalitarian society.

<div align="center">Belarus: Three Actions Within the Public Sphere</div>

Belarus is a former Soviet Union republic located in the north of Eastern Europe with a population of about ten million people. It borders three European Union countries: Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania. In early-2005, the former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice included Belarus among six countries regarded by the U.S. as "outposts of tyranny" (BBC News, 2011). Aleksander Lukashenko, the current president of Belarus, has been in power for 17 consecutive years. His regime is infamous for restricting basic human rights, such as freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of demonstrations (Kotljarchuk, 2004; Marples, 2011; Forbrig, Marples, Demes, 2011). Despite his efforts to silence any and all alternative messages, the people of Belarus still find ways to organize social protests to voice their concerns with the incumbent regime.

This essay examines the way in which underground media propels the formation of free speech and the public sphere in totalitarian state countries such as Belarus. For the purpose of this paper, public sphere is defined as a realm of life "in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk" (Fraser, 1990, p. 25). First, I will provide a detailed account of the state-owned media, the radical media, and the social activists as the three actors within the public sphere in Belarus. The first two of these actors are professional media outlets: government-owned TV, radio and print, and the opposition newspapers and radio stations. The third group, social activists, are engaged in the production of *samizdat* print materials. While this group does not have the professional capacity of a business-like media, its activity is

particularly important. The work of this group assists in disseminating critical information, such as places and terms of silent actions. In this paper, I discuss the goals, obstacles, and accomplishments of the three public sphere actors in Belarus.

State-owned newspapers, TV, and radio broadcasting stations form the official media in Belarus, with Belarusian Television (BT) being the largest state-controlled television network. According to Marples (2006), the main role of BT is to "perpetuate the image of the president as a robust, athletic personality and… convey the impression of a very personal supervision of society. [i.e., he establishes his presence] by flying by personal helicopter to ensure that crops are being harvested" (p. 356). All of the state-controlled media create an illusion that the problems of the country are constantly being resolved (Lysyuk, 1998). As typically used in a propaganda machine, BT broadcasts pro-Lukashenka messages several times an hour, while portraying opponents of the regime "as Nazis, terrorists, and seeders of chaos" (Lysyuk, 1998, p. 16). Moreover, a large emphasis is placed on the "president's demonstration of political innovation and non-traditional ways to overcome difficulties, such as the avowed "Belarusian path," vis-à-vis policies conducted in Russia, the CIS, and Europe" (Marples, 2006, p. 356). By the same token, all problems of Belarus are blamed on foreign plots such as the harsh conditions of the IMF loans (Aslund, 2011). In a public conference in June 2011, Lukashenko blamed journalists for "fomenting fear that resulted in a run on the country's currency and outside forces for using trash called the Internet to disseminate misinformation" (*The Azernews,* 2011).

Alternative or the opposition media (used interchangeably in this essay) work to offer a critical account of the situation within the country and on the international playing field. An online newscast *Charter97.org* is one of the most notable alternative sources housed outside of Belarus due to constant mistreatment and life-threats to the journalists (Ioffe, 2004;

Maksymiuk, 1999). *Charter97.org* is an online bulletin board that provides a forum for people to discuss human rights violations within the country. The website, named after the declaration calling for democracy in Belarus, provides live news coverage during political rallies and protests, while also serving as a place for people to organize silent actions and discuss plans for the next strike. Since Internet content is widely monitored by KGB agents in Belarus, *Charter97.org* has located its servers outside the country (Gapova, 2002), which has made it significantly more complicated, though not impossible, for Belarusian agents to block the website. *Charter 97* is one of the most outspoken opposition resources in Belarus, and as a result, journalists working for this resource face constant oppression from the government. Natalia Radzina, is a director of *Charter97.org*, and the *Eastern Partnership Community* newspaper reports that following the December 2010 elections, which was deemed to be corrupted by the European community, she was arrested and imprisoned for public disturbance. After a month in prison, she was released to the condition of house arrest. The same newspaper reported that she fled the country and "is currently beyond the reach of Belarusian KGB" (Charter97.org, 2011). After Radzina settled in her new place of residence, she posted on her website a strongly worded letter to the government of Belarus, explaining her reasons for fleeing the country. Despite any fear of the authorities, she felt it was her duty to continue the operations of *Charter97.org*, which serves as the biggest opposition network in Belarus (Charter97.org, 2011). She explained that she did not have the right conditions for continuing her job from Belarus; hence, she left to be able to continue providing a forum for opposition leaders who need an online presence to organize strikes and protests (Charter97.org, 2011).

The complications faced by opposition media journalists in Belarus are aplenty. Nonetheless, their work is important to stimulate conversation about the current state of political events. Scholars like John Downing and Jürgen Habermas,

whose work will be discussed below, suggest that in totalitarian states, the existence of radical media is of large importance as it contributes to the increase in the overall understanding of a political situation by "expressing an alternative vision to hegemonic policies, priorities and perspectives" and thus, effectively contributing to the breakdown of "blockages of public expression [that often emerge from] governmental secrecy … and institutionalized hegemonic code" (Downing, 2011, p. 10).

The final agent, and the largest group in the public sphere, is the body of social activists. They are a coalition of people who have gathered through the *Revolution through Social Networks* group on the Russian *Facebook* equivalent *Vkontakte* to organize social movements (Burak, 2011). The successful use of social media during the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan, and the 2011 Egypt revolution propelled this idea to mobilize people using social media (Siegel, 2008). Thousands came out to peacefully walk around their cities. At a specified time, they all began applauding in a pre-determined rhythm, which symbolized their unity against the totalitarian political regime. BBC News reported that the state-owned police force reacted immediately (2011). Many were arrested and fined for public disturbance, even though most of the international newspapers deemed the action to be peaceful (EuroNews, 2011; IBTimes.com, 2011; Xinhua, 2011). The June 22, 2011 flash mob further elicited a firm reaction from the US and EU officials, and gave rise to discussions of further economic sanctions Democraticbelarus.eu, 2011; Beata.by, 2011).

In summary, state-owned media, the radical media, and social activists make up the three actors within the public sphere in Belarus. The official government media has the task of broadcasting the hegemonic codes. Its message is clear and its position is secure: the state owned media is used to promote Lukashenko's regime. The other two actors – radical

media and social activists – contribute to the formation of the counter-hegemonic discourse in totalitarian societies. Evidently, the radical media and social movements pose a threat to Lukashenko's doctrines, and as a result, silencing the emergence of alternative broadcasting and print, becoming something of utmost concern to the incumbent government. Both of these groups are constantly subjected to legislation that further restricts their functionality. Moreover, evoking political change from inside the country is challenging for the same reason: those who attempt to implement alternative governing practices are subject to the law of the totalitarian state, and are to be silenced and arrested. The true potential for political change is most likely to develop by involving the international actors who are outside of Lukashenko's government's jurisdiction. In the case of Belarus, the U.S. and E.U. governments have frequently spoken out against the human rights abuse in Belarus. Upon learning that their words had little effect, they reverted to placing tight economic sanctions on Belarus officials who are actively involved in human rights violations (Voice of America, 2011; Council of The European Union, 2011).

## Theoretical Framework

In this essay, I will examine the potentials and restrictions faced by the underground media in forming the public sphere in a totalitarian society. The work of Jürgen Habermas is used to envisage the overall importance of a well-developed public sphere, while the work of Noam Chomsky and John Downing is used to highlight the limitations and potentials of underground media. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Jürgen Habermas (1989) ponders on the kinds of social conditions that must be in place for a rational-critical debate informed by logical arguments and *not* the status of the speaker to be conducted by private persons within the totalitarian state. Habermas (1989) also contended that a strong presence of the public sphere is both "the requirements of

[political] democracy and the nature of contemporary large-scale social organization" (p. 3). Simply, it would be impossible to continue progressing and evolving as a society if only the elitist opinion were considered. While Habermas (1989) suggested that the inclusion of all sorts of opinions might dilute the quality of the policy outcome, he argued that "participation in an argument is a means of education capable of overcoming the debilities that make some arguers inferior" (p. 2). To understand the significance of Habermas' thesis, the linguistic origins of the word "public" will be discussed in the following section, placing it in the context of Belarus.

Jürgen Habermas (1989) uses the word *public* in the context of state being the pubic authority as synonymous to the *words like mutual, reciprocal* or *shared.* "The state is a public authority", - he explains, - [therefore] it owes this attribute to its task of promoting the public or common welfare of its rightful members" (p. 2). This understanding is central to the discussion of building democracy in a totalitarian state as it underlines and embodies the very idea of a representative government, which defines democracy. In a democratic society, "governments are representative because they are elected: if elections are freely contested, if participation is widespread, and if citizens enjoy political liberties, then governments will act in the best interest of the people" (Przeworski, Stokes & Manin, 1999, p. 29). In a democratic country, the electorate voluntarily entrusts the power to make decisions to the elected government. In totalitarian societies, however, a vested interest of the state officials tends to override this promise of acting on behalf of the people (Havel, 1985; Radnitzky, 1993; Skapska, 2001). For example, with its tight control of underground media in Belarus, the state is eager to support only those media outlets that conform to the state-approved ideology and promote state-approved values (Manaev, 1995). Journalists holding an alternative opinion are prosecuted under the law of the dictatorship. In essence, this envisages a state-ordered violation of human rights and freedoms. At this

point, Habermas' argument holds true: it is impossible to simultaneously have a democracy while adhering solely to the elitist values and demands. Democracy means the will of the people: all people of all statuses, and not just the elites.

The nature of radical media in Belarus and its potential for inducing change offers important grounds for review. John Downing has written extensively on the role of underground media in the Soviet Union, and his words are applicable to Belarus – a country that continues to preserve media control tactics of soviet apparatchiks (Manaev, 1995; Marples, 2006). By drawing on the works of media scholars, Downing (2001) refers to the social change as a process of gaining media literacy (Silverblatt, 1995; Kellner & Share, 2005). In his literature review, Downing refers to the works of Radway (1988) when discussing the types of audiences essential for a media literate society (2001). The reviewed literature suggested that a participatory audience is the best kind (Radway, 1988; Lewis, 1991; Morley, 1992). To see the increase in critical awareness, people should be "working on and molding media products, not just passively soaking up their messages" (Downing, 2001, p.7). Those who were once exposed exclusively to the hegemonic opinion of the incumbent government now have a chance to analyze and critically assess events from both the mainstream and the opposition points of view. Once individuals learn to see the bias in the pro-government broadcasts, they become media-literate and therefore, better equipped to critically assess the intended effects of propagandist information broadcasted by the state-owned channels.

In Downing's (2001) terms, this sparks en masse involvement in disseminating the knowledge, whereby "the dividing line between active media users and radical alternative media producers becomes… blurred" (p. 8). Thus, when regular people become involved in the formation of anti-hegemonic opinion, this resulted to a long-anticipated formation of the public sphere. As in the case of Belarus, aside from the estab-

lished alternative media channels, the unity of the opposition movement gives rise to individual bloggers, political forum participants, and social activists producing samizdat materials. As Downing (2001) puts it, "in times of social tumult and political crisis [these types of media audiences] are the best informed advisers on movement strategies" (p. 33). In his terms, for the formation of a democratic society to take off, citizens must be educated on how to be actively involved in lobbying the process of policy-making. Simply put, to create democratic conditions where a responsible government considers the opinions and wishes of its people, citizens must be able to offer some clearly defined suggestions and/or actively state their values and opinions. This can happen only when people are exposed to various kinds of information and counter-hegemonic points of view, as opposed to the government-promoted dogma. Once this step has been taken, the government propaganda machine will no longer be regarded as "omnipotent." The cracks in the propaganda system will become evident and anti-hegemonic codes can begin to form. While policy may not yet be changed at this point, people can realize their discontent about dominant government. This understanding stimulates various social movements, such as protests, silent actions, or petitions. In turn, these actions can elicit an international resonance and, as Downing (2001) suggests, will "give [people] a stick with which to beat their government leaders" (p. xiii). They can appeal for a response from international NGOs, such as Amnesty International, who may reach out to powerful political players (i.e., international governments) and consequently, influence the political equilibrium by implementing trade sanctions, etc. For Downing, the starting point lies within the critical media education and media democratization of average citizens of the totalitarian society.

From Downing's (2001) perspective, a simultaneous mass participation can nurture the social sphere within a totalitarian society. Those involved in the formation of the public sector

could critically assess the situation and make economic predictions (Silverblatt, 1995). In the case of Belarus, a terrain for public discussion can be created only when those who experience the repercussions of elitist policy-making come together to share their problems. As seen in the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia, these conditions can stimulate plans for protests and strikes (Kavanaugh et al., 2011; Anderson, 2011). The Internet, in particular, offers a vibrant place for such discussions to take place. Old-fashioned ways of giving out pamphlets and gathering for meetings to plan protest actions or strikes, typically place those in charge of the organization in risky positions. Through the Internet; however, information may be disseminated quickly and more effectively, reaching thousands of people. The silent action, "Revolution through Social Networks" that took place in Belarus on June 22, 2011 is a case in point. People used online forums to discuss the strategy for protest, and coordinated an effective flash mob that attracted vast numbers of participants. In Downing's terms, discussion leading to an organization, and resulting in an event or an act (e.g., lobbying, striking, or protesting), is an essential condition for democracy and eventual social and political change. Once discussions are underway, public sector activism can set off a chain reaction where the now critically informed citizens can gather to implement the reformist plans. Downing (2001) recalls the anti-nuclear energy movements, during the Cold War. Throughout the period, people in both the US and the USSR were fed information about the greatness of their own political empire vs. images of their opponent as the enemy. At the same time, "the two camps' senile leaders, Brezhnev and Reagan, pointed ever more massive nuclear weapons against each other" (Downing, 2001 p. vi). Eventually, after analyzing the counterhegemonic information, the people developed an understanding that the mainstream print and broadcasting outlets were focused on building up the reputation for their own political camp, instead of providing information about the dangers of nuclear war itself (Whitton, 1951; Benett, 2008; Bernhard,

2003). As a result, citizens who could no longer bear to live under a constantly escalating conflict began to form anti-war social movements. An active presence within the public sphere grew, putting more and more pressure on political leaders (Downing, 2001). While the public discontent did not, on its own, resolve the nuclear crisis, it certainly forced the American government to consider the opinion of the people and attempt to fast track the resolution of the situation (Divine, 1988; Lebow & Stein, 1995).

In Belarus, the propaganda machine still operates at full force, though the hegemonic codes are slowly losing their influence. The Charter 97 online bulletin board, along with various other radical media outlets in Belarus, continue to find ways of reaching out to the public, despite being closely monitored by the KGB. As demonstrated by Radina's decision to flee Belarus to free it from restrictive Belarussian laws, many are concerned about a functioning radical media outlet. By guaranteeing ongoing radical news coverage, alternative media journalists have been able to break up the hegemonic dominance of the information being provided in Belarus. While Habermas and Downing highlight the importance of having an active radical media presence, in order to see progress in developing a democratic public sphere that is able to resist the hegemony of the totalitarian state, they do not adequately explain the restriction of citizens in acting in these openings. The authors do not address the important question of why the majority of people continue to accept the domination of a totalitarian state, even when they have access to critical information.

To analyze the above-noted dilemma I propose to refer to *Manufacturing Consent: the Political Economy of Mass Media*, - a book written by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky (1988). Authors have built their argument around what they refer to as the Propaganda Model. Simply put, they suggest that media outlets may be viewed as a business whose main

goal is to sell the information to the public, - in order to make money or to sway the public opinion, and not the provision of quality, un-biased news (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). The theory is based on five conditions or filters (ownership, funding, sourcing, flak and anti-communist ideology, – that influence the spin of the information presented in a particular media outlet. Only the first three filters will be used for the purpose of supporting the argument of this paper.

When applied to the socio-political behavior of citizens in Belarus, the filter of Ownership, Funding and Sourcing/ Economic reciprocity offer a reason why a certain layer of the population in Belarus continues to vote for Lukashenko, despite actively disagreeing with the incumbent policies. By addressing the differences in the socio-economic classes in a totalitarian society Herman and Chomsky (1988) argue that even if people understand the drawbacks of totalitarianism on an individual level, they collectively belong to a social class that is structurally locked into being pre-determined to serve a very small amount of political power. If a citizen does not agree with the mandate of the television company on an individual level that he works for, speaking out against the agenda on a higher level will likely to have little to no impact on causing a change. Instead, he risks losing his job and could be replaced by another, more agreeable candidate. A filter of Ownership would mean that if the TV station is government owned, then they are the ones who have the power and the Funding, - 2nd filter - to order the content. As a result, for a Sourcing filter would turn on for the journalist in question. According to the theory, the he would analyze his personal disagreement with the agenda, yet he would be reluctant to cover the story in a light that is contrary to the government mandate because this particular journalist is not willing to take the risk to put his career in jeopardy. Thus, theoretically, the journalist would still be operating within the realm of journalistic freedom as he is not, technically, being coerced into covering a story with a particular bias. Nonetheless, it is

unlikely an employee of a state-owned channel would risk speaking out his own opinion, should it be different from the status quo as he is well aware of possible repercussions such as being terminated from his position. Therefore, the roles and the norms of each class are pre-determined and can hardly be altered due to lack of influence and leverage over the elite social class. According to Herman and Chomsky (1988), this structural lockup places a significant barrier to the formation and development of a successful alternative media outlet since those in power have and are ready to use every means of censorship and control.

Furthermore, In *Media Control,* Chomsky (1993) proposed that every country with a strong political agenda (i.e., Belarus) needs a common enemy that can be portrayed in the media. In other words, he argued that the official state-owned media outlets are used as a tool for uniting people by propagating fear of a particular enemy. He drew on the most prevalent examples of the Cold War: the Red Scare in the US and Anti-Western propaganda in the Soviet Union. To date, Hollywood has notoriously portrayed people with a Russian background as kidnappers and terrorists. When Chomsky (1993) stated that "the same techniques were used to whip up a hysterical Red Scare, as it was called, which succeeded pretty much in destroying unions and eliminating such dangerous problems as freedom of the press and freedom of political thought," (p. 1) he was suggesting that when the fear of an enemy is permanently instilled into the entire population, people willingly surrender their rights to freedom of speech or freedom of the press. They do so in return for an air of guaranteed protection from the aggressor. Such ubiquitous compliance is certainly favored by the government, yet harmful to citizens who, out of fear, avoid engaging in critical assessment of the political situation within the country. Chomsky's thesis is a good explanation for the reputation that international actors have gained within the Belarussian official media channels. Minaev (1995) indicates "almost half the

publications described other nations as the enemies of Belarus in the past or present" (p. 13). To restrict information that might counteract this view, Lukashenko's government limits international access to Belarus, partly through recent amendments to the legislature that implemented strict control over the education system. Universities are now forbidden from granting students and professors leaves of absence to travel abroad or contact Western universities, even for the purpose of research or student exchange. The regime also threatens "to withdraw the advanced degrees of professors and teachers found guilty of unworthy behavior," such as participation in opposition rallies (Silitski, 1995, p. 92).

Second, Chomsky noted the need for a heavily divided class system to support such regimes. He examined the class structure within an authoritarian state and argued that such countries are run by the elite few – in the case of Belarus, the president and a small group of his very close advisers.[1] Next down the hierarchy are a number of mid-range businessmen, and to stay afloat, or even to survive, in the case of Belarus, they must serve the interests of the government. These types of people include TV station managers, CEOs, mid-range executives, and others who have the power and respect within their own realm, but their corporations must stay on the good books of the government to continue existing. Should the interests of the company sideline those of the government, the business, to use George Orwell's terms, will be *va-*

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[1] Interestingly, a number of Lukashenko's close advisers have gone missing or have been found dead prior to the last few elections. Some argue that these events happened shortly after the advisor in question pronounced disagreement with Lukashenko's policy of preemption. For more information, please refer to an article titled "Pinochet-style disappearances in Belarus" published by the International League for Human Rights.

*porized* immediately.[2] According to Chomsky (1993), "It ought to be a system in which the specialized class is trained to work in the service of the masters, the people who own the society," and "the rest of the population ought to be deprived of any form of organization, because organization just causes trouble." (p. 3)

Chomsky (1993) refers to the third and the largest social class as the *bewildered herd*. From the point of view of the elite few, the bewildered herd is nothing more than a grey mass of under-educated people with beliefs and choices that can, and therefore must be influenced to create peace and absolute compliance. Moreover, Chomsky argued that those in power "*have to* protect [themselves] from the trampling and rage of the bewildered herd...So [they] need something to tame the bewildered herd, and that something is this new revolution in the art of democracy: the manufacture of consent" (p. 2). Simply put, people will believe and follow any top-down agenda as long as it is justified, even in the slightest. Just like Winston Smith, the protagonist of Orwell's *1984*, who worked at revising historical records to concord the past to the contemporary party line orthodoxy, today's politicians work at remanufacturing facts and presenting them to the general public in ways that best serve their vested interests. In Belarus, for example, offers of international aid or research grants are never presented as an incentive, but rather as espi-

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[2] In *1984*, Orwell described the three-fold class structure: (I) the upper class Inner Party, (II) the middle-class Outer Party, and (III) the lower-class Proles (from Proletariat), who make up 85% of the population and represent the working class. As the government, the Party controls the population via four government ministries: the Ministry of Peace, Ministry of Plenty, Ministry of Love, and Ministry of Truth, where the protagonist of the novel, Winston Smith (a member of the Outer Party), works as an editor revising historical records to concord the past to the contemporary party line orthodoxy (that changed daily) and deletes the official existence of people identified as unpersons.

onage or as an attempt to sabotage and compromise local research and development (Bekus, 2008). In summary, Chomsky (1993) maintained that the authoritarian view of the lower classes was: "You've got to keep them pretty scared, because unless they're properly scared and frightened of all kinds of devils that are going to destroy them from outside or inside or somewhere, they may start to think, which is very dangerous, because they're not competent to think. Therefore, it's important to distract them and marginalize them" (p. 3).

The three scholars from the theoretical framework of this paper – Habermas, Downing, and Chomsky – have spoken to the importance of having active radical media to the formation of social movements and other elements of a public sphere in a totalitarian society. Unanimously, they argue that active citizen participation is necessary for influencing the policy-making process for forming a democratic society. Habermas and Downing suggest that becoming more media literate as a society is an act of citizen empowerment. This change strips the totalitarian government of the ability to have an omnipotent presence in disseminating hegemonic codes. Downing (2001), in particular, believes that any and all acts of social involvement, by the way people choose to dress, through the organization of flash mobs or political rallies, or through the use of Internet forums and social networks, contribute to the paradigm shift of power.

Finally, while the three authors agree that underground media and social movements carry a potential for political change, Habermas and Downing have a more optimistic view. In contrast, Chomsky (1993) reiterates that the class-based divisions within a totalitarian society form a structural lock-up, where those in the lower class are unlikely to move up to the elite class. Chomsky had a fatalistic approach when arguing that even if a counter-hegemonic idea may originate from a radical media outlet operated in the lower-class, its message will become significantly watered down by the time

it finds the needed, often costly conditions for print or broadcasting. According to Chomsky (1993), since running a well-established media outlet is not cheap, the directors of a radical media organization will inevitably find themselves in circumstances where they have to seek help, financial or otherwise, from the more affluent and well-connected upper class. The help is likely to be offered on the condition of altering the media content to better serve the needs of the elite few who, in a totalitarian society, are likely to have close ties to the incumbent government. Certainly, Habermas, Downing, and Chomsky might disagree about the amount of political change attributed to the radical media, yet the three scholars were unanimous in saying that an active public sphere will have an impact on the formation of a democratic society and on the eventual replacement of a totalitarian state.

## Belarus and the International Arena

In this part of the paper, I review press releases of international NGOs to show how the social sphere evokes international reaction that can influence political change. While the authoritarian government propaganda machine is a strong tool for creating conformity, pressure can still be exerted on the machine by initiating a political movement from outside the country. A well-developed public sphere is necessary to mobilize the masses and teach them how to increase internal pressure on the incumbent government. A well-known human rights activism coalition, *Amnesty International* is an example of an NGO working to pressure the government of Belarus from outside the country. In 2011, the organization officially declared political prisoners of Belarus as "prisoners of conscience" (Amnesty International, 2011). It further commenced an urgent action campaign, which asked people around the world to write to the president of Belarus, or the Belarusian ambassador to the US, demanding the release of wrongly convicted political prisoners. The UN press release addressed the issue from a similar perspective. The press sec-

retary, Ms. Pillay said, "The continued detention of political opponents, harassment of civil society and intimidation of the independent media are serious human rights violations" (United Nations, 2011). She further noted that the length and conditions of pre-trial detention in Belarus do not comply with the standards stipulated in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Her office has also received reports of the continued intimidation of lawyers who provide legal counsel to the detainees and journalists, as well as the harassment of non-governmental organizations. Overall, the UN has taken a stance against the human rights violations in Belarus, which is on its agenda to discuss with all UN members, along with urging them to take further action to protect the citizens of Belarus (United Nations, 2011).

The internal pressure comes from in-state radical media and social justice groups attempting to raise international awareness about the nation-state. Naturally, letter writing may sound like an ineffective means for eliminating authoritarianism, and simply talking about the issue at a UN summit also does little to stop unwarranted arrests in Belarus. Thus, the work of Amnesty International alone is insufficient to propel change in a totalitarian society. Nevertheless, the goal of Amnesty International is not to mastermind a revolution, but instead, to raise awareness at an international level. The involvement of similar NGOs can create a large public group that, in turn, can evoke reactions from powerful governments. While Amnesty International is calling out to Canadian and American students to write to Lukashenko and demand better treatment for his people, the direct result might not lead to changes for the political prisoners. Nevertheless, the public outcry may draw attention from other governments (Warkotsch, 2010).

The strategy has found some success. Shortly after the NGOs began raising international awareness about human rights violations, the governments of the US, Canada, and the

EU spoke out against the impediments to essential human freedoms (National Democratic Institute, 2011). The governments also retaliated with economic sanctions against a number of businesses in Belarus (Taylor, 2011). The U.S. and the E.U. maintain that the regime of Lukashenko "repressed dissent, arrested and harassed opposition leaders, muzzled the media, and manipulated elections, [and was]… responsible for the disappearance and presumed deaths of several leading politicians and activists in 1999-2000" (Marples, 2009, p. 756). The U.S. placed a ban on leading Belarusian officials, including Lukashenko, opposed financial assistance in any form to the Belarusian government, and monitored the export of weapons by Belarus to rogue states involved in acts of international terrorism (Tocci & Hamilton). The U.S. proposed surrogate radio broadcasts into Belarus, to provide overt assistance to democratic political parties, and aid the people of Belarus "in regaining their freedom and… enabl[ing] them to join the European community of democracies" (State.gov, 2009). The Obama administration continues to hold a firm stance against the regime in Belarus. After the failed 2010 elections in Belarus, Obama announced that he had determined that it was necessary to "continue the national emergency declared to deal with this threat and the related measures blocking the property of certain persons" (Obama, 2009).

The timeline of events and the reasoning behind implementing economic sanctions is far more complex than described here. While above literature review seems to be in consensus over the benefit of increasing media literacy among the citizens under an authoritarian leader, they also agree that those who participate in social movements inside the state are vulnerable to potential imprisonment and fines, legislated by the authoritarian government to eliminate any threat of developing the public sphere. Thus, to see a shift towards democracy, a public sphere in a totalitarian country must gain strength from an international resonance. As a consequence,

NGOs such as Amnesty International or Reporters without Borders, can lobby outside governments to take political or economic action to stop human rights violations in countries like Belarus. All in all, while a totalitarian government may be able to suppress social movements and small-scale political rallies within its own state, the actions of outside organizations are beyond its jurisdiction. By invoking NGOs and other governments, issues like journalistic oppression, human rights violations, lack of freedom of speech, and abusive situations that are prevalent in totalitarian societies can now be brought into the global arena. The opposition media no longer needs to adhere to the conditions imposed by the elite leaders who finance its distribution, the scheme outlined by Chomsky. Instead, all international newspapers and TV stations can cover the issues from different points of view. In doing so, they are drawing international attention to the case of Belarus, to force Lukashenko's government to adjust its policies. Even in these circumstances, however, true political reform is a slow process, and a paradigm shift is itself an accomplishment. As Downing points out, the results that come from peaceful ways of political pressure are not seen immediately, if ever. Without them, however, in-state social change will never take off, as the catalyst for political change will be missing. Thus, a developed public sphere is an absolute necessity, but not on its own sufficient for initiating political change in a totalitarian state.

## Conclusion

In a totalitarian society, the state has an overwhelming dominance over its citizens. To establish the starting ground for political reform in a totalitarian society, first and foremost, social participation and an active public sphere are essential to forming a democratic society. Nevertheless, in a totalitarian country, the extent of free speech and involvement in free media policy-making is greatly limited for citizens. Those who

are outside the sanctioned media suffer from legislated government restrictions. Even the media outlets are restricted in the kinds of opinions they may voice safely.

In a totalitarian society, political reform must be initiated with a bottom-up approach. As evident from the literature review conducted in this paper, an active public sphere and open social involvement inside the state are necessary for initiating a democratic reform. In Habermas' (1989) terms, the first step towards any sort of a political change is creating an active public sphere that is strong enough to hold the elected government accountable for the needs of its electorate. When the public sphere is weak and the people are afraid to voice their opinion or demand different living conditions, the government has little incentive to cease its authoritarian tactics.

In Habermas' (1989) view, the machine of a totalitarian regime will continue at full force as long as no well-structured social movements are underway to impede its existence. In support of this argument, Downing (2001) explained that educating people to be more media literate and critical of the information they receive could serve to establish the anti-hegemonic codes in the no longer omnipotent totalitarian system. Once social pressure from within the state gains enough force, it can act to set off an international reaction. From the case of human rights oppression in Belarus, the work of radical media outlets such as *Charter 97* have been translated to multiple languages to reach people who are outside the totalitarian state. Furthermore, social movements like *Revolution through Social Networks* have been successful at organizing flash mobs and other protest actions against Lukashenko's regime. The social movements have made it to the front page of many international media outlets like CNN or BBC. As a consequence, other governments, like the Obama administration, have been forced to speak out against the human rights violations in Belarus, since the problem is visible at the global level. Finally, the role of individuals have

an overwhelming importance in history. While an active public sphere cannot achieve political reform on its own, it is necessary for giving rise to the possibility of political change. By being aware of the stories of Nasta Palazhanka and Nataliya Radzina, one can see that every socio-political action, however small or seemingly trivial, has a place in forming a democratic state. The development and growth of a public sphere begins as each individual citizen chooses to become involved in the process that can reform the political landscape of a country.

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