



Inverting the Medium, Severing the Oppressive Hand

Yildiz Subuk

Simon Fraser University, Burnaby

Abstract

Media use has played a key role in the fight against colonialism. Different mediums from film to radio have become an integral strategy for groups resisting colonial forces. Frantz Fanon's account of the Algerian revolution in *A Dying Colonialism* shows how Algerians subverted colonialist media, the radio. What was once a tool for dispersing colonial ideology soon became a way for Algerians to mobilize their revolution against French rule. This paper explores the historical and contemporary use of media as a tool for resistance and self-representation. Expanding on the blueprint provided by Fanon, the paper draws on Edward Said's *Orientalism* and Barry Barclay's *Fourth Cinema* to discuss the importance of self-representation in media and the dangers of colonial distortion, which often infects and overrules the narratives of those facing oppression. To expand on the concept, this paper also looks at the state of the current resistance movements. From Palestinian social media activism to Indigenous filmmaking, the way media is subverted to remove oppressive forces from gaining authority over the narratives of oppressed groups demonstrates the importance of the practice in the fight against colonialism.

Keywords: Self-Representation, Media Subversion, Colonial Resistance, Activism, Oppressive Narratives

MEDIA IS A POWERFUL TOOL when it comes to the fight against oppression. Media circulation plays a key role in shaping culture as new means of communication spread across regions and blended into the background of everyday life. The transformative nature of media has been a useful tool for colonial forces. Colonizers can use different forms of media to aid in the erasure and reshaping of the culture and ideology of the groups they target. Media has been used throughout different points in history by oppressive powers to control, erase, and distort marginalized identities. However, the transformative power of media also enables its use by oppressed groups as a form of rebellion, decolonization, mobilization, and a way of storytelling without the influence of an oppressive presence. Marginalized groups have and continue to reverse the damaging impacts of the colonialist use of media by integrating these tools into their fight for liberation.

In Frantz Fanon's seminal work, *A Dying Colonialism* (1967), he outlines how Algerian society rejected and then adopted radio technology to sever the hands of their oppressors during its struggle for independence from French colonial rule. Fanon (1967) describes how mediums such as radio can be a method for colonial powers to ideologically destroy the Algerian identity, but also how Algerian revolutionaries used this medium by flipping colonial technology on the head of the colonizers. Fanon's work is key to understanding how oppressed groups use colonialist technologies and mediums against their colonizers. Most importantly, Fanon's work depicts its success through the lens of Algerian individuals active in the revolution for freedom against French colonial rule.

Stories of oppression, liberation, and identity should belong to marginalized groups. Outside forces looking to capitalize on the stories of marginalized people can distort these stories as they do not live the realities of marginalized groups. From the Algerian revolution to the ways Indigenous communities across the world redefine the colonialist implications of media, technology has become a key component in the fight against colonization.

The Potential of Media:

Media is not just simply a way of communicating through subtext, but also an effective way of shaping public opinion. As defined in Salvin Paul and Maheema Rai's (2023) *Role of the Media*, "The media works as the tools that publicize information and entertainment to a large and vast number of populations" (Paul & Rai, p. 2). Electronic media was a "turning point" in

communications—it can have a farther reach than print, as it allows for the distribution of certain forms of communications to be expanded (Paul & Rai, 2023, pp. 2-3). In the chapter “The Medium is The Message” in *Understanding Media*, Marshall McLuhan states that “it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action” (Paul & Rai, 2023, pp. 2-3). The media extends well beyond just content or message—it is also the medium that matters. A message can be delivered and received through various methods, but what makes that message most significant is its technology: the medium it is being transmitted through. The power of the medium becomes clearer when examining the “Nixon versus Kennedy” debate which aired in 1960 (Hillier, 2015, p. 145). Those who tuned in on the radio were under the impression that Nixon won the debate, but that is because a major detail was omitted from the consumer’s perception: the image. The majority of the population that tuned in on their television claimed Kennedy won. Kennedy’s appearance and demeanour won over the American public more than his words. Nixon’s appearance on television made him seem “uncomfortable” and “sinister.” He was a difficult presence to trust, whereas Kennedy appeared charismatic and genuine. The message was the same, yet the medium played a huge role in determining who won and shaping public opinion.

While electronic media reinforced the power of the medium, social media reinforced the importance of distribution. Since the emergence of social media, an abundance of information has become decentralized. This meant that consumers did not need to rely on large media outlets like the New York Times or Washington Post to deliver the news. The news could be shared on social media outlets, but most importantly, every consumer could also create and upload media themselves. Social media allowed non-mainstream media to be dispersed and spread amongst massive populations, often bridging the gap between borders (Paul & Rai, 2023, p. 3). The intermediary roles of mainstream media outlets no longer dominate the way media shapes public opinion. Since the proliferation of social media, consumers can easily become producers by uploading their content without the need for mainstream outlets to distribute their work.

With electronic and social media, oppressed groups facing the brutalities of colonization have the ability to use the two forms of media to their advantage: to both document their first-hand experience and mobilize change. These forms of media present a high potential for marginalized groups to express agency within storytelling.

Fanon's Blueprint for Transformative Media:

Franz Fanon's (1967) *A Dying Colonialism* examines the nature of the Algerian Revolution (1954-1962). It is a seminal text documenting Algerian society in their resistance against French colonization. Being Algerian himself, Fanon's (1967) work is an important example of self-representation. *A Dying Colonialism* examines how factors such as medicine, clothing, radio, and family fit into the crux of revolution. Fanon elaborates how radio was first rejected by Algerian society, then embraced for its transformative power. To fully grasp the extent of what radio meant to Algerian society during French colonial rule, it should be noted that radio wasn't the only form of media used in colonial pursuits. Fanon also discusses how mundane aspects of society can be colonized by examining the veils that Algerian women wore and how oppressive forces reduced the Algerian woman as a subject of a "backwards" society. A tangible way in which colonizers labelled Algerian society as "backwards" was through clothing: Algerian women wore veils that covered their faces (Fanon, 1967, p. 35). To the oppressor, this was a sign of restrictiveness. The veil represented a symbol of patriarchy to the Western gaze. This was, as Fanon states, an "attempt to confine the Algerian in a circle of guilt" (Fanon, 1967, p. 37). Algerian society was labelled with terms that seemed threatening, such as "medieval", "barbaric", and "vampirish" (Fanon, 1967, p. 37). The use of these terms are vital when it comes to labelling a society. Radio had the power to reinforce the notion that a backward society needs to be fixed, as it allowed this ideology to be transmitted across many regions. To those who were non-Arabs living in Algeria, the Arab identity became distorted such that the view of Arabs was rendered negative and dangerous, establishing the grounds for colonization.

Next comes a form of colonial technology that must be used to communicate the importance of French-Colonial rule in Algerian society. Radio was a pervasive colonial technology because it was something that blended into the background of everyday life. A small object with the potential to transmit colonial ideology and news shaped by the oppressor, radio was the French colonialist tool for subtle colonization (Fanon, 1967). But for radio to have its full effect, Algerian society needed to be labelled first. To the French, radio was a form of displaying a lavish lifestyle filled with culture and festivities. The absence of radio in colonized parts of Algeria was symbolic of a lack of French control. Algerian society initially rejected the radio, seeing it as a colonialist form of technology. For the French, the radio was a connection to French civilization. It was a preventive

measure to ensure that the colonizing power “did not go native” in a land where the society repudiated their ideals (Fanon, 1967, p. 71). The radio was initially a sign of French presence as a way to not only spread news from the French perspective but to hide certain news as well. The presence of radio became daunting to Algerians, not because of its ability to just spread information, but because of its ability to disappear into the background. The radio can blend into the background, and without even knowing its entire presence, influence consumers’ thinking.

However, after 1954, the power of radio as a way to fight back became clear. Radio transformed from a rejected technology to a participant in the revolution. It went from being an “evil object,” a form of anxiety, to a “protective organ” for this anxiety (Fanon, 1967, p. 89).

Algerians, before radio, were already experts in large-scale communication. Colonialists called this the “Arab Telephone”, referring to how news spread through word of mouth (Fanon, 1967, p. 78). This communication technique was also a signifier, as the French were constantly under the impression that Algerian society was connected in the efforts for revolution and in touch with a chain of command. Once the “Arab Telephone” had reached the radio, the revolution mobilized even further. Algerian resistance rejected, analyzed, dismantled, and reassembled colonial technology in their fight for independence. Through this, they became the authors of their identities, stories, and history. The French Colonial rule could not infest Algerian society *because* they recognized the power of the mediums that were initially used against them.

Even when the French targeted Algerian society for the enforcement of veils, Algerian society began to use this colonialist tactic against the French. The veil, which was part of Muslim tradition in Algeria, had been abandoned as women went undercover into colonialist society and carried out missions for the revolution. The French had racialized Algerian women and learned to identify them through their apparel and therefore had little idea these women had joined the revolution. In turn, Algerian women had chosen not to wear it to subvert the enemy’s expectations (Fanon, 1967, p. 58). The French had underestimated how much the Algerians valued their identities and their ability to use colonialist perceptions of themselves against the colonizers. As Fanon puts it, “The colonizers were incapable of grasping the motivations of the colonized” (Fanon, 1967, p. 59).

Agency in Storytelling:

Algerian society, as described by Fanon, is where “the Algerian found himself having to oppose the enemy news, with his news” (Fanon, 1967, p. 76). The news had to be in the hands of the Algerian. The news in the hands of colonial forces was news that omitted details as a form of defence; the oppressor’s lie was constructed to combat the actual truth of Algerian identity. When a group of people are not given the agency to tell their stories authentically, oppressors grow fearful that their sense of identity could falter once the oppressed group gains authorship of their truths. The radio plays a large role in storytelling, but it is not just this form that tells stories—paintings, photographs, and the combination of media outlets variously referred to as “social media.”

Orientalism by Edward Said (1979) highlights how colonizers legitimize colonial pursuits by depicting the Orient as a place of backwardness through the creation of harmful myths and stereotypes. In paintings like *General Bonaparte Visiting the Plague-Stricken at Jaffa* (Gros, 1804) the colonial hand paints a different culture. Said’s work criticizes this notion of storytelling which places the paintbrush, camera, pen, or microphone in the hands of those outside of the culture they intend to portray. This is done intentionally for the fear that the dominant culture may be threatened by others with differential values. In this, the problem of stereotyping arises, which can convince those part of an oppressive society that their way of life is superior. The oppressed cultures begin to take the form of those that need saving in the eyes of the oppressive society. Said states “The modern Orientalist was, in his view, a hero recusing the Orient from the obscurity, alienation, and strangeness which he had properly distinguished” (Said, 1979, p. 121). To oppose the oppressive hand, oppressed groups find ways to self-represent. As Barry Barclay (2003) explains in his paper “Celebrating fourth cinema”, movies about a social group do not qualify compared to movies that are produced by creators of that social group. It is imperative to acknowledge that traditional media content does not accurately present these groups, and misrepresentation can result in the formation of problematic views of these social groups for the general audience. Allowing room for self-representation is vital as it allows for specific and nuanced portrayals of communities’ experiences within a culture oppressed by colonialism.

To understand what authentic self-representation looks like, Barclay (2003) lays out the difference between each degree of cinema. The distinctions are: First Cinema as traditional Hollywood films, Second Cinema as “arthouse” films, and Third Cinema as films produced in third-

world countries (Barclays, 2003). These films often expose the harsh realities of those who reside in the area. These first three forms of cinema are the ones present in mainstream story-telling but do not acknowledge the importance of having the guide of a marginalized voice behind the camera. Barclay (a Māori filmmaker) categorizes Fourth Cinema as a form of self-representation for Indigenous people as it allows Indigenous filmmakers to tell their own stories—stories situated in their own communities (Barclay, 2003, pp. 6-7). This allows for a thorough approach to storytelling which does not group all indigeneities into one, instead focusing on a distinct community (Barclay, 2003, p. 4). This becomes vital in breaking the colonial gaze, as it shows the diversity of Indigenous communities while also allowing Indigenous people to break the deficit narrative placed upon them by the oppressive hand. Many Indigenous communities have seen a lack of representation in Hollywood films, and those that are represented are often done through a colonial lens. Such films tend to label them as “separatists,” “guerillas,” and “rebels” who are found in the setting of civil wars.

The need for self-representation is important in the context where oppressors perpetuate propaganda through the use of social media, especially considering the power of the Israeli propaganda machine. Propaganda pages on social media sites like Facebook such as “Israel Speaks Arabic” or Ofajaa Adraei’s account (an Israeli military spokesperson) distort the perception of the brutal treatment of Palestinians by specifically humanizing Israeli soldiers (Mualla, 2017). Adraei’s account captures the Israeli military as a defence force upholding the nation’s safety. The soldiers are portrayed as compassionate individuals—the media is “selective” as it only shows military personnel practicing their standard procedures instead of any actual footage of *how* these procedures are exercised in the context of violence towards Palestinians. The image of “a state that tries to maintain its own security, with a strong army that fights terrorism” (Mualla, 2017, p. 66) is curated through Adraei’s account. The terrorists in this scenario are Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip, who unlike those living in the West Bank (currently controlled by Israel), are seen as a group not willing to negotiate peace (Mualla, 2017, p. 53). Adraei’s account attempts to paint his community as victims of coercion by terrorist groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah, allowing the Israeli military to play the role of saviour. Israeli propaganda doesn’t just aim to paint the Israeli military in a positive light for domestic support but also focuses on distorting the views of those *not* affected by the genocide. While the Israeli occupation is often painted by the Israeli propaganda machine as a defence procedure, Palestinians have used social media to tell their truths. They have found ways to

document the oppressive Israeli apartheid and occupation that is taking place in the West Bank. Many of these voices have been heard, and their struggle has been mobilized through the use of mass media technology. The Palestinians, similarly to the Algerians, understand the importance of subverting the colonial perspective through the use of media. Instead of radio, however, the Palestinians utilize social media. In 2010, an activist named Hasan in the village of Al Ma'sara, used Facebook to post the realities his community was subjected to (Wulf et al., 2013, p. 1985-1986). By 2012, many more Palestinians began using Facebook to mobilize support and advocate for the Palestinian cause. The need for Palestinian voices to advocate for their statehood was most efficiently filled through the strategic use of social media. By depicting the harrowingly inhumane ways the Palestinian people were treated, as well as the Palestinian protest rallies against the Israeli occupation, many across the globe were able to see the struggle but were also able to find ways to join the revolution (Wulf et al., 2013, pp. 1985-1986).

The documentary *No Other Land* is another example of Palestinian self-representation as well as an exposure to a horrifying truth. The film depicts the violent occupation of Masafar Yata by the Israeli Military. The purpose of the military was to seize the land of native Palestinians to turn it into a training ground, displacing all inhabitants in the process. The film is captured through the lens of a Palestinian journalist, Basel Arda who is joined by Yuval Abraham, an Israeli journalist (Abraham et al., 2024). The documentary is a reminder of how the media can play such a pivotal role in self-advocacy. The footage in *No Other Land* does not just serve the purpose of story-telling but tells a truth which has been distorted by colonial media. The devastating reality that *No Other Land* presents to the audience directly juxtaposes the aforementioned propaganda perpetrated by the colonial forces. The audience no longer views the perspective of the military, who supposedly enacts “commendable heroism”. Instead, the brutalization and horrific nature of military commandeering is on full display. The critical success of the documentary in the West also highlights the potential of self-representation within media for fighting colonial projects such as the ongoing genocide in Palestine. This self-representation is an inescapable truth for all to see.

Conclusion:

The medium matters just as much as the content. Fanon's deconstruction of the radio, which was once seen as a colonial tool used to infest Algerian society, shows how the Algerians strategically flipped it into a revolutionary medium. Fanon's work outlines a pattern in which

oppressed communities fight back by subverting colonial technology into a means of resistance, representation, and mobilization. Fanon's account of the Algerian revolution in his book is an example of how using media to reclaim one's story can be a focal point within a revolution and the fight against oppression.

The use of Fourth Cinema, as stated by Barry Barclay has been a tool for Indigenous storytelling in North America. Fourth Cinema dismantled stereotypes that legitimized the grounds for colonialism, subverting the content and medium. Alternatively, while Hollywood (as First Cinema) racialized Indigenous communities, stripping their stories of important contextual diversity, and producing harmful stereotypes. Fourth Cinema, then, became a way for Indigenous communities to gain control of their narratives and assert agency. These communities have used the technologies of colonial forces to capture *their* truths instead of ones distorted by the colonial gaze. From the use of radio in Algeria to the way cameras are utilized by Palestinians, the oppressed have redefined the technologies used against them and instead of rejecting the medium, have incorporated it into their fight for self-determination.

References:

- Abraham, Y., Adra, B., Ballal, H., & Szor, R. (Directors). (2024). No other land [Documentary]
- Barclay, B. (2003). Celebrating fourth cinema. *Illusions*, 35, 7–11.
- Gros, Antoine-Jean. (1804). General Bonaparte Visiting the Plague-Stricken at Jaffa [Painting]. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA, United States.
<https://collections.mfa.org/objects/33010>
- Fanon, F. (1967). *A dying colonialism* (H. Chevalier, Trans.; 1st Evergreen ed.). New York : Grove Press.
- Hillier, P. M. (2015). Rethinking Media and Technology: What the Kennedy-Nixon Debate Myth Can Really Teach Us. *Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies*, 5(2), 143–156. <https://doi.org/10.29333/ojcm/2510>
- McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding media: The extensions of man*. New York : McGraw-Hill.
- Mualla, A. (2017). Palestinian-Israeli Cyber Conflict: An Analytical Study of the Israeli Propaganda on Facebook. *Journal of the Arab American University*, 3.
<https://digitalcommons.aaru.edu.jo/aaup/vol3/iss2/4/>
- Paul, S., & Rai, M. (2023). Role of the Media. In S. N. Romaniuk & P. N. Marton (Eds.), *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Global Security Studies* (pp. 1278–1286). Cham: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-74319-6_277
- Said, E. W. (1979). *Orientalism*. Vintage books.
- Wulf, V., Aal, K., Abu Kteish, I., Atam, M., Schubert, K., Rohde, M., Yerosis, G. P., & Randall, D. (2013). Fighting against the wall: Social media use by political activists in a Palestinian village. *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 1979–1988.