BA Communication Arts

# Alternative & Activist Media

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# Contents

## 1 Alternative and Activist Media

### 1.1 Introduction - Alternative Media

Community media might have attracted a cursory level of scholarship, but *alternative* or *radical* media has been interrogated in more detail. While alternative media is similarly vague as a term of description for a form of grassroots media, the common perception is that alternative media is more easily recognised because of its associations and links with oppositional or counter-cultural and political movements (Coyer, 2005; Vatikiotis, 2005). Chris Atton suggests that we often use the phrase alternative media as a "catch-all for anything that isn't available at our local newsagents." Which suggests, according to Atton, that the phrase "*alternative media* is a synonym for 'underground', 'radical', 'oppositional' – even 'samizdat'" forms of politically vibrant communication (Atton, 2002, p. 2). Bailey, Cammaerts & Carpenter suggest, however, that descriptions and accounts of alternative media follow a fashion that allows these forms of media to be seen as an "instrument giving voice to a group of people related to a specific issue," in which they are engaging in "different types of struggle for equality" (Bailey, Cammaerts, & Carpenter, 2008, p. 29). This is not a characterisation of alternative media that seeks-out or prioritises institutional impartiality and neutrality, but instead, as Mitzi Waltz suggests, is something that is the expression of "socially marginalised or dissenting groups, subcultures, ethnic minorities, and others who inhabit liminal spaces in mainstream cultures," and who will be "most likely to seek out alternative media, and to create their own if it is not found." As Waltz goes on to assert,

> In a world where the mass media exists less to inform or entertain than to sell audiences to advertisers, these people's desires are unlikely to be met in the mainstream marketplace (Waltz, 2005, p. 8).

As such, attempts to characterise alternative media have tended, as Simon Order suggests, to "over-emphasise the oppositional value of alternative media as challenging the mainstream" (Order, 2012, p. 70), in which the mainstream is presented as "monolithic and unchanging," and where "the power of the mass media marginalizes ordinary citizens," so that they are "denied access to its production," and are consequently "marginalized by its reports" (Order, 2012, p. 70). Alternative media, then, is closely associated with *protest* and *dissent*, and collective forms of participation and organisation that promote a view of culture and media that is contradictory to that offered in accord with dominant and conventional social values. However, as Ellie Rennie suggests, alternative media can seldom be identified by its association with common themes and issues that form a "singular project or a cohesive, rational goal," that can simply be placed under the label of "democratic media." Instead, as Rennie suggests, alternative media should be viewed as "multiple fronts upon which

citizenship is being constantly negotiated through expressions of identity and cultural strategies" (Rennie, 2006, p. 21). Alternative media, moreover, has a *cachet* of subversion, opposition and destabilisation of cultural and social norms, and as such is highly regarded for its ability to remain "open to experiments in design, new ideas about writing and composition, and cutting-edge topics" (Waltz, 2005, p. 109).

Accounts of alternative media suggest, therefore, that there is a need to overcome definitional limitations that revolve around simple binaries, such as mainstream versus alternative media. Instead, as Bailey, Cammaerts, & Carpenter suggest, alternative media is concerned with its "status as contested spaces structured, and reconstructed anew, according to the needs, experiences and aspirations of specific groups." Particularly the experiences of groups and people who would be "otherwise underrepresented, ignored or trivialised elsewhere in the mediascape" (Bailey et al., 2008, p. x). The belief is that alternative media is important for a sense of "identity and belonging," (Bailey et al., 2008, p. xi) and for the space that it enables in the daily lifeworlds of people who are enacting personal and collective struggles for recognition, social status and esteem within their communities (Georgiou, 2001). In this sense, alternative media opens out the idea of the *personal* and *local* as a democratic political project by "refusing an authoritarian conception of life and politics." Alternative media, therefore "touches upon the notion of power" and the "perceived need and struggle for change"(Bailey et al., 2008, p. 3). As with community media, the organisational arrangements of alternative media play an important role in promoting social change, as participants in alternative media groups and networks are encouraged to "co-decide at both the level of media content and organisation" (Bailey et al., 2008, p. 14). So, while power imbalances will not vanish altogether, alternative media can be said to offer a sense of empowerment to its members. As Bailey *et al* suggest,

> Alternative media not only allow but also facilitate the participation (in its more radical meaning) if its members (or the community) in both the produced content and the content producing organisation (Bailey et al., 2008, p. 13).

Hence, by facilitating access and participation in the politics of self-representation, alternative media offers potential contributors and producers the opportunity to intervene in a pluralistic civic sphere in which individuals and communities are empowered – perhaps on an issue basis – through diversity, through democratic practice, through deliberation and discussion, and through participative access. As such, alternative media might be considered as a "knowledge reservoir that

can and should be accessed by public broadcasters and should be mobilised in the face of a radical pluralistic democracy" (Bailey et al., 2008, p. 156). The risk with many accounts of alternative media, however, is that they can be thought of as a celebration of a disparate set of ethical and political stances that are difficult to constitute as a cohesive programme of political action. While many of the recognised forms of radical media offer a virtuous and laudable core set objectives, addressing the "need for greater empowerment of the large majority of ordinary people removed and disenfranchised from the media and the political public spheres" (Bailey et al., 2008, p. xii), it is not obvious in what way they will impact on and divert the dominant models of mainstream communication and economic/political relations. As Chris Atton suggests,

> Whilst 'radical' encourages a definition that is primarily concerned with (often revolutionary) social change (and 'Radical' the same for a specific period of English history), 'alternative' is of more general application (Atton, 2002, p. 9).

## 1.2    Competing Agendas

So, in deploying the term *alternative* as a consistent and substantiated term, it is useful to keep in mind that there are differences between forms of alternative media that seek to challenge the prevailing political orthodoxies, and forms of media which offer space for communication outside of the mainstream. There is little point in valorising or glamorising either over the other, however, because the theoretical problems that stem from this indeterminacy necessitate, at the same time, a set of "different approaches to defining media that allow for complimentary emphasis on different aspects of alternative media" (Bailey et al., 2008, p. 5). In discussing alternative media, then, it is essential to note that representation of marginalised or misrepresented voices and identities is an essential element of alternative media's core qualities. Alternative media is said to frame mainstream media as a site of competing agendas and ideologies that are defined through institutionally located values and commercial or regulatory logics, and as Bailey *et al* suggest, these values or ideologies allow mainstream media organisations and systems to

> Grant legitimacy to 'leading' social values through constant exposure of them to the audience. In this process mainstream media become ideological as they reproduce a constructed and preferred view of 'reality'. In addition, they have the power to define which specific issues to bring to the public arena, and they become ideological by giving priority to ideas of the main social actors such as the state, politicians, and private sector over the views of disenfranchised minorities in civil society (Bailey et al., 2008, p. 16).

Alternative media, therefore, is either a direct engagement in political action, or it is a representational struggle for meaning within the context of socially available discourses and conversations. As different people have access in different ways to the symbolic tools of

communication that are available within different community settings, then different outcomes can be expected from their use. At any one time there will be groups who are marginalised and who are powerless in relation to the dominant forms of symbolic communication that circulate in any culture. The question is, however, to what extent do alternative forms of media make *useful* and *engaged* interventions in challenging the 'realities' that are represented in these situations? If alternative media is only ever defined in negative terms against the mainstream, moreover, then the *contingent* and *localised* interruptions that occur may not be given sufficient prominence in any review or evaluation of the status of the alternative stances. As Bailey *et al* point out,

> What is considered 'alternative' as a certain point in time could be defined as mainstream at another point in time. The social context in which alternative media function is inseparable from the concept of 'alternative media' and can serve as a starting point for the definition of alternative media (Bailey et al., 2008, p. 18).

Alternative media, therefore, should be understood as both a response to the inequities in representation of marginalised and excluded groups in society, and as a "space for identity negotiation" (Bailey et al., 2008, p. 86). This is an outlook that suggests that forms of media and representation are varied and wide-ranging, the opposite in-fact of the homogeneous and dominant mono-cultural view that constitutes the mainstream. As such then, and as Bailey *et al* point out,

> The multiplicity of 'minority media' might attest to the formation of new forms of mobilisation and political solidarity among a number of minority groups. They all search, in different ways, for fair modes of symbolic and political representation that allow them to participate and to contribute to the construction of a multicultural democratic society (Bailey et al., 2008, p. 85).

Optimistically, then, this approach to alternative media suggests that as media communications technologies and practices have been changing, then there is more opportunity for social groups to address the representational disadvantages that they experience and are subjected to, and possibly defined by. The extended channels of media communication that are opened up by alternative media, therefore, potentially offer the opportunity for stigmatised and repressed social groups to "strengthen their internal identity," while also making "manifest this identity to the outside world," and thus "enable social change and/or development" (Bailey et al., 2008, p. 14).

There is no single, correct way to define alternative media, instead it is necessary to combine a number of different approaches that take account of the "multiplicity and diversity of alternative media initiatives," while "acknowledging the concepts that structure and define their identity as well

as their fluidity, as a micro level of analysis" (Bailey et al., 2008, p. 150). Indeed, it is "clear that the category of 'alternative' and 'mainstream'" themselves are not fixed, as they can be "extremely fluid" (Bailey et al., 2008, p. 151). So rather than attempting to define alternative media by its content, and the relationship of that content to mainstream media, it is perhaps more useful, as Chris Atton suggests, to identify a

> Methodological framework that incorporates content as one element in an alternative media culture that is equally interested in the processes and relations that form around alternative media production (Atton, 2002, p. 3).

So, and as Bailey *et al* suggest, this means thinking about the

> Enabling environment for alternative media, not merely from a purely regulatory perspective, but also at the social, political, and cultural levels, in allowing resistance and voicing of dissent in the social and political realm (Bailey et al., 2008, p. 154).

Defining alternative media, therefore, by its capacities to "generate non-standard, often infractory methods of creation, production and distribution" (Atton, 2002, p. 4), as well as by the form of its content, ensures that it is possible to look at what it means to be a producer of radical media, rather than simply imagining that radical media emerges fully formed in response to mainstream media. As Chris Atton suggests, this means that we should rethink "what it means to be a media producer" (Atton, 2002, p. 4) because, and as Bauman and Donskis suggest,

> The more we try to think the unthinkable and to speak the unspeakable, the more likely we become to qualify for a niche in a power structure, whether local or global (Bauman & Donskis, 2013, p. 123).

Accordingly, the orientations that ought to be considered when discussing alternative media are not defined exclusively by the means of production, i.e. the type of media that is being used, but instead on the basis that alternative media is a contribution to multiple forms of civic participation. Effectively asking the question: *who* is producing media that pushes away from the mainstream, and to what extent these producers are "normally excluded from media production" (Atton, 2002, p. 4)? It is one thing to imagine that a new social movement can be borne from the simple act of publishing or circulating an alternative media product, but it is another thing to build-up the *capabilities* of marginalised social groups so that they are able to motivate and mobilise social activists more generally to challenge and change the established and dominant meanings that are held in society. Attention should be given, therefore, to alternative media as a set of relationships and as a "process" (Atton, 2002, p. 6). A process that "privileges the transformatory potential of the media as reflexive instruments of communication practices in social networks" (Atton, 2002, p. 7).

Alternative media, therefore, offers representations and content that diverge from the interests of mainstream media, and in the process alternative media foregrounds differences that signify the symbolic space that is created *for* and *by* different social groups who wish to promote direct participation, and emphasise the local nature of the issues they are dealing with. In turn, this gives space to the perception that these are minority issues that are being discussed. This means, moreover, that there is greater emphasis placed on the way that media platforms are used by alternative media producers, because being explicit and transparent about the way that alternative media is produced, highlights to the readers and the audience, that this is a form of media production that is significantly different from the mass media. In the mass media model media companies take great efforts to hide the way that content is produced (Barthes, 1972). Therefore, the focus of alternative media does not exclusively rest on the product, but is alternatively focussed on the process of production. This process relies more on forms of "open access and volunteerism," and attempts to make explicit the goals of the producers that are guided by "social change," and based on a "not-for-profit orientation" (Waltz, 2005, p. 3). In this way these alternative media products are considered to be both *alternative* and *activist* led, and can be evaluated by a different set of criteria, such as the extent to which the users of the media content consider them to be *authentic*, *useful* or *representative* of their individual or communal identities. This process of evaluation eschews talk of "production values, audience size, and profit-making acumen," (Howley, 2010, p. 18) and instead promotes the language of *transformation*, *social relations* and *innovation*.

## 1.3 Alternative Media Participation

There is considerable overlap, then, between the values of alternative media and the values of community media, and so the ideas that are linked by means of *participation* are useful measures for establishing "common ground" between the two (Howley, 2010, p. 18). This suggests that an analysis of alternative media will have to draw on insights that are made available through different forms of investigation. Kevin Holwey suggests, this might include "critical theory and media and cultural studies, as well as social movement theory, to explain radical alternative media" (Howley, 2010, p. 17). But as Howley elaborates,

> First, these media are vehicles to 'express oppositions vertically from subordinate quarters' toward concentrations of economic and political power. Here, radical alternative media are a resource for production and dissemination of 'counter-information' that challenges the veracity and legitimacy of dominant media representations of social or historical reality.

> Second, […] radical alternative media play a pivotal role in building 'support, solidarity, and networking laterally' within and between disparate constituencies working toward social transformation. Thus, radical alternative media provide audiences with 'mobilising information' that animates political activism, nurtures collective forms of resistance, and brings social change agendas to wider publics (Howley, 2010, p. 17).

Where observers and commentators of alternative media have to be careful, however, is in recognising that there are a number of competing processes at work that do not easily fit in a neat logic of social and political economy. As Henry Jenkins (quoting John Fiske) suggests, attention should be given to the "multiplicity" of forms of identity and production that alternative media encompasses, that either lead to "more of the same," or to *something different*, and hence promotes a wider sense of "diversity." A sense of diversity that "reflects a range of alternative identities and agendas" (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013, p. 260). Ellie Rennie calls this a "fragmented, messy, and often contradictory existences and ambitions," but suggests that this is not a sign of failure to correctly contextualise alternative media, but simply "evidence that our previous assumptions about alternative media have been misplaced" (Rennie, 2006, p. 21). The radical potential of alternative media is focussed, then, on the way that alternative media groups reject "traditional hierarchical corporate governance structures," and instead prioritise "collective decision making as an important value." In this regard, and as Porta & Mattoni suggest,

> The creation of alternative media outlets and alternative media texts, like radio broadcasts or newspaper articles, also contribute to the empowerment of people participating in such processes. Individuals involved in the production of alternative media outlets and texts regain their voice in societies, speak for themselves and do not delegate their narratives to any external media professionals (Porta & Mattoni, 2013, p. 176).

Alternative media, therefore, invokes processes that have a wider place in media and communications understanding, including: Survival in a Market Economy; Counter-Hegemonic Actions; Realignments and Activism; Rhizomatic (Dis)Organisations and DIY Media. The remainder of this discussion will lay out vocabularies pertinent to these issues.

## 1.4 Survival in a Market Economy

It is worth making some observations at this point about the challenges that are thrown into relief by alternative and community media, and the way that they might be considered a reaction to, or an emergence from, the economic systems and the political infrastructures that are prevalent in the Western democracies, i.e. the market economy. While Bailey *et al* ask "how difficult is it for alternative media to survive in a market economy" (Bailey et al., 2008, p. 4), we might also want to

ask what the presence of alternative media tells us about the nature of the dominant economic and civic systems that structure the Western developed economies? As Bailey *et al* point out, "at the organisational level, the existence of alternative media shows that media can exist independent of state and market," (Bailey et al., 2008, p. 18). The questions that arise, however, are to what extent this is an *either-or* proposition, and hence a pact that structures critical understanding of alternative media and the cultures that it represents? Is it possible that the social systems of Western capitalist democracies are more pluralistic than they might be given credit for in some of the more strident and deterministic accounts of political economy (Chomsky, 2008)? Perhaps when discussing alternative media, and attempting to situate its operations in the context of Western economic models of political economy, it might be more useful to think pragmatically and ask how alternative media producers, *themselves*, make deliberate attempts to "undermine the power of large media corporations" (Order, 2012, p. 73)? Further, we might also ask to what extent these producers assume a "model of the media where 'people using small-scale media prevail'?" This need not be the result of "idealism or entail the overthrow of large-scale media," but might instead suggest that alternative media consists of localised "spaces in which small-scale media already prevail" (Atton, 2002, p. 8). As Simon Order suggests, "researching alternative media at the social grassroots level reveals more about value than the binary approach of mainstream media versus the alternative media" (Order, 2012, p. 74).

So, the challenge is to develop a picture of alternative media producers and their accomplishments as they demonstrate and play-out their commitment to the civic values, such as arguing for "social change," and seeking to "involve people (citizens, not elites) in their processes." This is because alternative media producers and activists are "committed to innovation in form and content" (Atton, 2002, p. 15), and also because, as Mitzi Waltz suggests, "there must be room under the alternative media umbrella for media forms with a unique artistic vision, or those that cater to underserved audiences despite having a corporate business model" (Waltz, 2005, p. 3). In this pluralistic setting, then, alternative media can be conceived as a form of democratic activism that deals the "with political and cultural struggles in the process of social change that are actively performed in the sphere of civil society, and with changing political identities" (Bailey et al., 2008, p. 23). However, as Mitzi Waltz goes on to suggest, it is despite these pluralistic nods that alternative and activist media have always "been marginalised by their reluctance to use a capitalist business model or target mass audiences" (Waltz, 2005, p. 3). According to Waltz, "one could choose simply to deconstruct the term 'alternative media' to reveal a basic definition," in which alternative media is understood as

"media that are alternative to, or in oppositions to, something else." For example, "mass-media products that are widely available and widely consumed" (Waltz, 2005, p. 2). But as Bailey *et al* point out, alternative media has already established "different types of relationships with the market and/or the state" in order to survive. So in questioning the forms of this survival, and the reasons that justify this perceived survival, alternative media producers can fashion a politically and economically charged symbolic and practical space against the backdrop of the "rigidities and certainties of public and commercial media organisations" (Bailey et al., 2008, p. 28).

## 1.5   Fragmented Media

Alternative media, therefore, resists easy definition within narrow categories, because alternative media is from the *margins*. Alternative media takes forms that are *diverse* in their format, content and ethos, and alternative media producers pursue a *critical agenda* that seeks to challenge mainstream views. The practices of alternative media are difficult to define because they are "not part of a uniform and homogenous culture," instead they are "enterprises characterised by fragmentation and dispersal" (Bailey et al., 2008, p. 87). Alternative media, moreover, does not occupy traditional policy positions in relation to regulation, financing or civic legitimation, and therefore might be better thought of as a countervailing force somewhat in contradiction to commercial media and public service media. Indeed alternative media serves communities that are transient and dispersed, which like themselves "are (or could be) [...] equally quickly forgotten, in favour of markets and (national) publics" (Bailey et al., 2008, p. 54). Furthermore, alternative media is *minority media* that practices *hybrid* forms of production, taking elements from mainstream media production and mixing them with other, more innovative forms. The objective of alternative media is to avoid mirroring the mainstream by proposing a "more meaningful and distinctive [...] ethos, that is, political mission and/or social conscience in relations to their specific communities" (Bailey et al., 2008, p. 87). For many, however, alternative media is recognisable because it offers utopian models in which many people contribute and share their ideas and concerns.

There is no guarantee, however, that alternative media won't itself "privilege small-scale 'affinity groups'" based around controversial public issues. It's just that these groups tend to "work together with almost no hierarchical formation and an absence of bureaucracy" (Atton, 2002, p. 5). The activists and producers who choose to become involved in the creation of alternative media content might be just as interested in their political and activist roles as they are in what they are discussing

and writing about. Alternative and community media, therefore, are both an *interest position* (i.e. political) and an *attitude* (i.e. identity and expression). These are combined positions and approaches that "wish to present other interpretations of stories – and to present stories not normally considered as news – which challenge the prevailing 'hierarchy of access'" (Atton, 2002, p. 10). Therefore, alternative media is a home to ideas, stories and discussions that challenge government regulations, that seeks to resist commercial pressure from advertisers and corporate owners, but also, more often than not, challenge the "innate conservatism in news reporting," for example, so that a different set of "news priorities" are articulated that "do not appear in the mainstream media" (Atton, 2002, p. 11). However, as Waltz suggests,

> Content, intentions, and production will, by necessity, evolve to fit the situation in which media is produced, or it will lose its relevance. Accordingly, alternative media are 'alternative' only in the context of their response to, and participation in, the cultures within which they are produced and consumed (Waltz, 2005, p. 5).

Alternative media, therefore, simultaneously serves a number of different purposes. In some instances alternative media will act as a main source of information, but for others, as Waltz suggests, alternative media provides an additional "provocative 'extra ingredient' in a mostly mass-media diet." Therefore,

> Some alternative media may enter the mainstream and cease to be alternative. Still others will act as a vehicle for communication, self-enhancement, contemplation, or escape. And some will do all these things at different times, in response to audience demand, outside events, or the interests of writers, videographers, researchers, artists, or publishers (Waltz, 2005, p. 8).

It is easy to romanticise the role of alternative media, as has happened with many of the accounts of the Pirate Radio movements of the 1960s (Harris, 2007; Humphries, 2003), but the debate is further advanced, however, when people seek to challenge the constraints and exclusivities of media publishing and distribution. As Rennie suggests "where constraints on broadcasting exist, people will find a means to transmission" (Rennie, 2006, p. 81). In this sense alternative media is an active attempt to find the gaps within mainstream, market-led communication and offer something that legitimates the voices and the identities of the other potential producers who are making them.

### 1.6    Counter-Hegemonic Media

Challenging mainstream ideas about economic and social provisions is clearly not a simple undertaking. Having the intention to promote an alternative sensibility through the distribution of

media is not the same things as acting as a *resistant agent* and *counter-hegemonic force* against the mainstream. Alternative media is often equated with political actions that are clearly oppositional, and is sometimes, therefore, referred to as "'resistance' media," (Atton, 2002, p. 8). Forms of resistance through which different types of creative and cultural expression, news reporting, discussion, and so on, are offered as "counter-hegemonic critique of the mainstream" (Bailey et al., 2008, p. 15). As Chris Atton notes,

> An alternative publication might then be interrogated as to its radicality in terms of its multi-dimensional character, a perspective that privileges the overlap and intersection of dimensions (Atton, 2002, p. 27).

Alternative media, moreover, is sometimes bound to make clear and overt anti-commercial statements, and adopt methods that are antithetical to political conventions, because such statements are a way to demonstrate the "practical commitment" of the producers as they seek to advance their "political strategy," which is usually, but not always, "one that is against capitalism and managerialism" (Atton, 2002, p. 34). The fact that alternative media are more concerned with the anxieties of everyday life and ordinary people's needs, is itself recognition that there is more to cultural and political resistance than "economic determinism" (Atton, 2002, p. 51). Indeed, by championing the needs of ordinary people it is possible to signify that alternative media "falls outside the formal corporate mainstream media," and instead embodies the "Gramscian notion of the counterhegemonic" (Howley, 2010, p. 87).


Any dispute about hegemonic rationalisation, however, is short-circuited when considering that it is in the "nature of activism to respond to social issues as they emerge" (Atton, 2002, p. 12), and that "even within a single area of alternative media there is much heterogeneity (of styles, of contributions, of perspectives)" (Atton, 2002, p. 8). In understanding how people are subject to hegemonic forces, we might enquire how something is either subject to those hegemonic forces or it is not? There can be no *in-between* or *indeterminate* state, so counter-hegemonic resistances cannot emerge as diversified and alternate perspectives as if by magic. As Carlos Fontes explains,

> Traditionally alternative media theorists tend to fall into two main groups. The first group defines alternative media from a macrosocial perspective and focuses on their capacity for counterinformation in a struggle with the mainstream for hearts and minds of citizenry, as well as their role in building a counterhegemonic project of society. The second group of theorists focus their analysis on the way alternative media practices change subjectivities and everyday social relations in community settings and argue that the wider impact of alternative media can be detected cumulatively over time in the strengthening of grassroots organisations and struggles of local communities (Fontes, 2010, p. 382).

The question is, then, do alternative media producers and activists engage in counter-hegemonic politics on the basis of their grassroots accomplishments, as they are measurable over time, or are these counter-hegemonic actions expressed more directly as a set of assertive actions that repel the ideologies of the dominant mainstream? What are the forms of alternative media practice that "counteract mainstream media coverage and resist suppression" (Todd, 2010, p. 377)? Even asking simple questions about '*who's*' news is being presented may lay within the purview of the counter-hegemonic, because it draws attention to the way that news values are bound-up with issues of ownership and control. The problem, however, is to figure out what difference it makes in having this knowledge and awareness?

Much of the discussion about counter-hegemonic media rests on the recognition that by introducing different social players into the news production process, then the forces of repression may somehow themselves be reversed. So, in championing different news producers in the mass media, and "introducing 'alternative social actors [such as] the poor, the oppressed, the marginalised and indeed the ordinary manual labourer, woman, youth and child as the main subjects of [their] news and features" (Atton, 2002; Traber, 1985), the expectation is that social and political change will be brought about. The problem rests, unfortunately, on the dubious proposition that these oppressed people will really want to self-identify as under-privileged or marginalised in order to serve this agenda (Freire, 1970, 1994, 1996, 2001)? What, as a fig leaf! So rather than simply placing people into stereotypical roles of oppression, it may be more effective to *deprofessionalise* and *deinstitutionalise* alternative media, so that it is more instantly recognisable as a form of communication that is different from the mainstream and mass media by being more accessible. As Chris Atton suggests, alternative media

> Must be available to ordinary people without the necessity of professional training, without excessive capital outlay and they must take place in settings other than media institutions or similar situations (Atton, 2002, p. 25).

With this in mind there is an ever-present temptation to "conceptualise media power as a zero-sum game wherein media corporations are viewed as all-powerful while so-called ordinary people are powerless" (Howley, 2010, p. 19). Perhaps a more useful formulation for alternative media is to look at how it is part of a process that creates and sustains "solidarity among activists" (Todd, 2010, p. 378), and is able to maintain the momentum of political actions regardless of the mainstream media coverage they receive. Increasingly ICT and social media platforms are used to maintain high levels

of communication with supporters of different causes and campaigns, with the focus on providing a technical infrastructure that facilitates a network of activists. Often this might take the form of subversion, or *subvervising* (Shifman, 2014), to make social points about issues that are being discussed. Indeed, as digital and media production tools are becoming more widely available, efforts are increasingly being made for community activists to "remake the media," (Howley, 2010, p. 279). Hence, alternative media is well positioned to lead these emerging debates and discussions, as there is a wide experience and historic pattern of behaviour in alternative media groups of counter-hegemonic engagement that encourages symbolic subversion and parody.

To recap then, alternative and community media is self-managed, not-for-profit, embedded in communities, and resistant to corporate organisations and professional models of working. Alternative and community media gives space and resources to activists and participants to become directly engaged with de-professionalised forms of media production that eschew the techniques and routines of the mainstream media. As Howley suggests, "in this way, community media provide a forum for dissent and a vehicle for cultural resistance and oppositional politics" (Howley, 2010, p. 234). Therefore, alternative and community media encourages contributions from a wide range of people who are able to express their views from their perspective, while being utterly partisan about their interests and concerns. Avoiding balance and impartiality is an energetic expression of counter-hegemonic intent, so alternative, activist and radical media are *creatively engaged* when they are focussed on their *accomplishments*, and not on their organisational structures or production procedures. Politics in this model is assumed to exist at all levels, and the primary question is: *who*'s interests are being served in the communication agenda being offered? This means that the challenge for alternative media, as with all political movements, is to find ways to "expand its audience beyond the choir" (Todd, 2010, p. 377).

## 1.7    Professional Realignment

Alternative media, like many other forms of media and cultural production, are situated within specific cultural contexts that are characterised by the time and the place of the agents who are producing those cultural forms. It is a basic premise of media and cultural studies that we all "write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific'" (Hall quoted in Atton, 2002, p. 22; Hall, 1990, p. 222). Explanations of alternative media, therefore, often take account of changes to the form and the style of different artefacts and discourses that are

afforded by different technologies, and which activists have to hand. Thus, different settings enable agents and activists to express different forms of identity, at different times and in different ways. Moreover, this sense of *meaningful engagement* with the world is dependent, not only on the different communication technologies that are available, but also on the extent to which communities are able to engage with, and are conversant with, the *processes of communication* itself. As Chris Atton suggests,

> Whilst the bracketing-off of processes (and even content) might afford us conceptual clarity, the better to look closely at what we mean by 'alternative media', we must not forget to recouple them with history and culture when dealing empirically (Atton, 2002, p. 22).

Furthermore, alternative media, as has been previously attested, is characterised by a sense of "defiance," by which alternative media producers are said to be *against something*, whether that is "corporate media or global capitalism," or, as Chris Atton points out, even "their own, local sociocultural settings?" The challenge, according to Atton, is "not necessarily to deny them nor even to rebel against them, but to show that it is possible for individuals to conduct themselves, accommodate themselves – apparently contradictorily – within a number of settings" (Atton, 2002, p. 131). So in this way, a reflexive reading of alternative media might also consider the way that activists choose to read these acts of defiance? Are they acts of *proclamation* and *assertion*? Are they acts in which the producers of alternative media proclaim their identity and status as producers, rather than simply as "mere readers or consumers?" Is the simple proposal that ordinary people can be "encouraged to be organisers, producers and writers" an act of defiance itself  (Atton, 2002, p. 88)? As has already been identified, the value of activism not only comes from the political assertions themselves, but also comes from "multiplying those 'moments of transformation'" when other people are encouraged to become involved in the process of alternative meaning production. Thus "encouraging their profusion through self-education and a culture of activism." To what extent then, we might ask, do alternative media activists hope to "meet their aim of empowerment through 'information for action'" (Atton, 2002, p. 88), and in what way are they able to justify their attempts to alter the "dynamics of symbolic power?" Accordingly, to what extent is this more than a "disruption" or a "tactic" (Rennie, 2006, p. 20). As Ellie Rennie goes on to argue,

> This approach recognises the oppositional quality of alternative media without placing it in a binary position in relation to the mainstream media. If we privilege 'alternative media practices' wider concern with the politics of speech, rather than its positions on formal politics,' it may spark 'a debate on the conditions for effective democracy in mediated societies (Rennie, 2006, p. 20).

While discussing activism as a *practice* and as an *accomplishment* is often given low priority in media studies, the issues of oppositional and alternative politics as *texts*, or as a *political enterprise*, are generally prioritised over the process of *enactment* that activists undertake in producing and articulating media content. The texts and discourses of politics, however, are really only a limited part of the picture. Studies that collect news reports, magazines, fanzines, and other forms of DIY media, and then analyse this content solely in its textual and representational form (i.e. its content), are missing out on the visceral lived experiences of the activists who are accomplishing significant things in their lifeworlds. As Chris Atton attests, "writing and publishing are only part of the picture; to complete it 'you have to go out and see it for yourself'" (Atton, 2002, p. 120). Furthermore, the idea that the structure of mass communication can be *destabilised* through forms of mass participation and two-way communication by alternative media activists, is itself open for question. As Rennie suggests, the proposal that "passive audience members could be transformed into active producers," holds considerable sway in media and cultural studies discussions. The problem, however, and according to Rennie, is that this argument is "premised on a conception of popular media as monolithic and singular" (Rennie, 2006, p. 18). Furthermore, then, if mass media and its audiences are conceptualised with regard to the different levels of engagement by audiences, then the relationship between the two can be disentangled. According to Rennie, "alternative media is in fact an extension of the active audience (from active consumption to production), a cultural interaction, and not an argument against popular media" (Rennie, 2006, p. 19). In this sense the challenge is to realign the relationship between mainstream and alternative media, and to reduce the emphasis on the simple binaries of active/passive audiences, or consumer/producer, or subject/activist. The challenge is to reorient thinking about forms of media practice and engagement so that they highlight the *co-dependencies*, the *co-production*, and the *co-operations* that take place in the circulation negotiations of meanings.

Chris Atton recalls that

> Raymond Williams highlighted three aspects of democratic communication which we might consider as foci for this realignment: decapitalisation, deprofessionalisation and deinstitutionalisation (Atton, 2002, p. 4; Williams, 1980).

When professional specificity is shrouded in mystery, and communication is regarded as the exclusive purview of castes of technical specialist, then there is little wonder that activists are indispensable in pushing-back against the closed-circles (the priesthoods) who assert themselves on the basis of an extended sense of entitlement over the operations of mass communication, and

thereby implementing the potential and dominating meanings that are disseminated. However, as the appreciation of a greater sense of active participation is fast becoming widespread, especially in web and social media studies, then the traditional structures of the media are themselves becoming a thing of the past. As the division between activism and consumption becomes so diffuse as to be unnoticeable, then perhaps we will all be participants and activists? As Mitzi Waltz points out, however,

> Like all forms of communication, alternative media and activist media respond to the social situations they are produced in, including economic changes and overt or covert repression. At all times they provide a counter-narrative to that put forward by mainstream media, but that narrative can be expressed in many different ways, depending on the era (Waltz, 2005, p. 4).

To be alternative, therefore, requires those people who are dissatisfied with mainstream media and dominant culture to continually *remake* and *remodel* the forms of alternative media that they are enacting. Being alternative for alternatives sake is not possible. Wishing to cater for tastes and desires that fall outside of the mainstream, *in themselves*, do not amount to a strategy for being alternative. Instead, being alternative is about looking at the local operations of different communication systems and organisations, and challenging the way that they are structured and controlled. However, all that can be said is that which is required at the present moment will not be required in perpetuity. Therefore, when the mainstream has adopted radical democratic organisational models of *open media*, *non-hierarchical decision making*, *decentralised infrastructures* and *active participation* by *non-mainstream voices* around *non-traditional issues*, then a different conception of the *alternative* will most certainly be needed.

### 1.8    Campaigning Media

There are many suggestions as to what an "inclusive model of alternative media should include," particularly non-commercial and grassroots publications. However, who could have predicted that the highly personal forms of social media that have emerged in recent times, such as blogs and Twitter, would now be held as exemplars of alternative media capable of contributing to and "furthering open debate" (Waltz, 2005, p. 20)? Indeed the Internet and social media seems increasingly to be lionised as an effective tool for the dissemination of alternative politics. As Symon Hill suggests, the Internet "can be used to organise economic and physical resistance as well as to spread alternative ideas."  And while Hill acknowledges that the "internet does not create resistance," he does suggest that it can "both encourage it and affect the form that it takes." As Hill continues, "when resistance happens in new ways, elites can be taken by surprise. When

communication takes new forms, control over communication can be weakened or broken" (Hill, 2013, p. 28). Hence, utopianism and optimism pervades many of the discussions that take place about social media, and the way that it is used to promote alternative and oppositional ideas. As Dandan Liu suggests,

> Social movement groups have always strived to put their messages onto the media agenda for the purpose of either seeking or obstructing changes. Activists have expected the media to be the agents for disseminating the ideas and, at the same time, for legitimising their action (Liu, 2010, p. 251).

It's just that now, as Kevin Howley suggests, the "internet and related technologies" are being seen as having the "potential to open up new discursive spaces" (Howley, 2010, p. 284). And these spaces and technologies are thought to be able to make it easier for information to be disseminated, and for social movements to increase public awareness of their causes. Hence giving us "new modes of resource mobilisation," that "change the existing notions of collective action and social movements" (Todd, 2010, p. 377), and provide a popular resistance to global issues. To what extent, then, does alternative and community-based media have the capability to enhance awareness sufficiently to mobilise popular resistance to these forces? While it is possible to suggest that "activist community media hold[s] enormous potential for democratising the global mediascape" (Howley, 2010, p. 346), it might be somewhat naive to set this in stone before evidence of the differences that are made to political struggles and alternative identity formations are recorded. If the Internet is a welcome tool for the decentralisation of mainstream media, then it is likely to be a tool that further decentralises alternative and activist media as well? The question is to what extent this is made possible, and to what end? In age of 'clictivism' some are suggesting the "internet is undermining activism," because, as Symon Hill suggests "'Twitter and other social networks have given people the impression that fighting for human rights is easy: all you have to do is hit 'retweet' and the world will be a better place'" (Hill, 2013, p. 13).

One thing that has changed significantly, however, is the way that Internet technologies are helping to make campaigns that are local, into campaigns that are visible on a global stage. As Anne Marie Todd suggests, "local activists can distribute information, post reports of campaign progress, and issue press releases online" (Todd, 2010, p. 377). With new communication technologies activists groups and social movements can extend the reach of their communications and use the resources of dispersed organisation to make different forms of action possible, reducing the time that information takes to exchange, and making actions more immediate. As long as activist groups have

access to the technologies and resources that support their activities, then they are able to "empower activists to create media," and thereby foster and connect activist networks outside of the corporate mainstream. Todd cites Indymedia,[1] which she describes as endeavouring to

> Empower people to become the media' and to 'present honest, accurate, powerful independent reports.' The long-term goal is to 'foster and facilitate the development of as much independent media as possible around the world,' such as the development of independent national/international television networks and newspapers, to ensure public access to independent news reports (Indymedia, 2007) (Todd, 2010, p. 377).

Perhaps as Hill suggest, "rather than deterring people from activism, the internet has drawn people to it" (Hill, 2013, p. 13). Is there a link, for example, between the issues that are campaigned for, and the type of organisation that many activist groups advocate? The decentralisation of decision making in activist groups may be a challenge to more traditional and process-driven political parties and organisations, who cling to a form of centralised representation, campaigning and management, and which is inimical to alternative and dispersed political campaigning.[2] Alternative media, therefore, with its focus on two-way communication, the setting of common goals, and efforts to retain activists based on a collective sense of identity, tend to find, as Todd suggests, that decentralisation is "integral to the idea of a movement." What, then, are the lessons that can be observed and learnt from the practices of decentralisation? What can be learnt from campaigns that are able to "mobilise in numerous locations a greater number of activists locally who exhibit solidarity across expansive geographical distances?" What can be learnt in translating these forms of solidarity into a "coherent message," and sharing them in examples of media content that like-minded people find meaningful? (Todd, 2010, p. 376).

## 1.9    Grassroots Alternatives

This isn't simple to achieve at any level, especially as "activism is as diverse as the people who take part in it" (Hill, 2013, p. 15). However, as Kevin Howley suggests "if we apply these insights to community based media," then we might "begin to appreciate the critical role independent, alternative, and grassroots media play in facilitating cultural expression within and through social movements" (Howley, 2010, p. 237). Diversity is an organising strength, the expectation that activist

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[1] https://www.indymedia.org.uk/
[2] Witness the challenges faced by the UK Labour Party at present
http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jan/13/revealed-how-jeremy-corbyn-has-reshaped-the-labour-party

groups self-organise and that politics is practiced as a form of DIY accomplishment, may open more space for an embedded reorientation of alternative politics. Anything that refuses to "grant primacy to any particular site or mode of struggle" can be seen as incorporating "useful starting points for an analysis of the contemporary alternative media" (Atton, 2002, p. 82). As Hill suggests, this might include looking to the *novel* and the *surprising* (Hill, 2013, p. 18), but it also might include making plans that go beyond developing "strategies to interact with the media in order to put the activists' messages onto the media agenda as well as the public agenda" (Liu, 2010, p. 251). More likely, though, it may end up resulting in a wholesale campaign for the "democratisation of the media," and not just "democratisation through the media'" (Howley, 2010, p. 279), that seeks a wider media network that is better at reflecting and adapting to "information networks that support and stimulate globalisation-from-below" (Howley, 2010, p. 344). As Dandan Liu suggests

> The rationale for this approach – that media framing is a dynamic process, and certain frames may win or lose their prominence in the news media – opens out the possibilities for social movement activists seeking change (Liu, 2010, p. 251).

Focusing on the everyday social practices, interactions and accomplishments that shape cultural attitudes and perceptions of activism, might as a result offer more solid viewpoints to gauge the "identities, perspectives and sensibilities that provide the basis for collective action," while also allowing cultural and political movements to be understood at the point of their "intersection" (Howley, 2010, p. 235), and therefore come-up with a set of responses that are more viable and sustainable than simply wishing that revolution may happen when people change "the way they look at themselves." Moreover, if "private problems" are to "become political issues," as Hill suggests, then more needs to be done to understand the process by which "people develop a collective will and an understanding of struggle" (Hill, 2013, p. 64). Looking, instead, at the capacity of alternative and community media to "support and nourish a viable alternative public sphere" (Howley, 2005, p. 223) is therefore pressing.

## 1.10   Summary - Alternative Media Issues

To summarise then, the conflation of terms and vocabularies between community media and alternative media needs to be disentangled. The different directions of travel that each represents might share some common roots and expectations, but they need to be delineated and characterised anew, based on practical observation and an understanding of the intentions of the

agents acting in these respective lifeworlds. The tendency to promote the social and political virtue of alternative media often masks and disrupts the less romantic notions of mundane self-representation that are offered in community media activities. Taking time to map out the commensurable discourses, vocabularies and regimes of language use is important. The following section maps out these competing terms as a parallel set of objectives and sensibilities based on the experience of DIY media and the concept of rhyzomic and territorial communication approaches.

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