

ALTERNATIVE MEDIA  
AND THE POLITICS  
OF RESISTANCE

PERSPECTIVES AND CHALLENGES

EDITED BY MOJCA PAJNIK & JOHN D. H. DOWNING

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INTRODUCTION:  
THE CHALLENGES  
OF “NANO-MEDIA”

MOJCA PAJNIK, JOHN D. H. DOWNING

As the 21st century’s first decade ripens toward its conclusion, the theme of alternative media—whether identified as “grassroots,” “independent,” “community,” “participatory,” “self-managed,” “autonomous,” “tactical,” or “alternative”—has moved from the margins of political and academic debate to the center. As often happens, technological shifts become the topic of excited speculation, and over the past decade in particular, the potential of the Internet and mobile telephony has been a fertile subject of commentary by pundits and peons alike. Its relocation of the possibilities of public communication from the one-to-many vertical model of newspapers, broadcasting and cinema to some-to-many, some-to-some, and even many-to-many models, is genuinely new.

However, the urgent need and desire to communicate publicly outside, despite and against official and mainstream mass media, is in no way new. Whether we consider the marketplace ribaldry and disrespect for authority echoed in Rabelais’ *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, the leaflets/fliers (*Flugblätter*) of the Protestant Reformation or the English Civil War, the long history of anti-war writing and popular song, the even longer history of women’s self-assertion in writing, political satire in theatrical history (e.g. *Lysistrata*), graffiti, defiant religious sermons, or many other communicative forms, the evidence—and its amazing variety—is not hard to find. The emergence in the 2000s of Internet avenues for public expression such as MySpace, FaceBook and YouTube has opened up fresh opportunities for a very ancient social drive.

This is a topic that began to engage some writers in the latter decades of the previous century, for example Hans Magnus Enzensberger (1970), Patricia Hollis (1970), James Aronson (1972), Armand and Michèle Matelart (1974), Christopher Hill (1975), Pio Baldelli (1977), Frances Berri-gan (1977), Seth Siegelaub and Armand Matelart (1983), Marc Raboy (1984), John Downing (1984), Jim Bushnell (1989), Timothy Ryback (1989), Stephen Riggins (1992), Pilar Riaño (1994), Nancy Walker (1995). But

since 2000 there has been a growing river of case-studies and analyses, which at the time of writing looks as though it might for a while become a torrent.

This could be attributed to fads and fashions, and no doubt there is something of that involved. But mostly it is a long overdue recognition of the cultural and political significance of these “nano-media,” an acknowledgment of their pervasiveness and potential power. In this context they appear as modern pamphleteers, as sites for socially committed storytellers, or as settings for practicing marginalized discourses that remain outside the dominant public sphere. They can furthermore be credited with bringing forward opportunities for empowerment of communities, possibilities for transnational activities by social movements and their various challenges to contemporary borders and boundaries. In different forms and practices, be it in the engagement of autonomous or independent media centers, or engaged video production, social movement media may appear as tellers of truth, as sites for fresh interpretations of our realities, and as counter-parts to mainstream mediated production that disrupt its rules and conventions. They may be seen as bringing forward new values, inventing new frameworks of news gathering and journalistic work, and last but not least, new economies. An example under the radar of most Western commentators, who see in the African continent only the series of disasters the Western media serve up to them (so they can enjoy feeling virtuously shocked), is the Nigerian video-movie movement, underway now for fifteen or more years and growing at increasing speed. Finance, production and distribution are organized entirely to date from within the unofficial economy, not by banks, the state or foreign aid. It is wildly popular, because it addresses issues close to everyday Nigerian life, although for mostly budgetary reasons, its technical production values often fall short of the lavish but empty products of Hollywood. It is one of the very few successful sectors of indigenous economic growth in Nigeria, drawing upon everyday skills all the way from feeding the crew to DVD-sleeve design, and from posters and billboards to costume-making. Its products are sold and imitated in many other African nations but are also in demand in centers of Nigerian settlement outside Africa, such as London, Washington DC and Houston. Its messages are about many things, but often strongly imply a political critique that would be risky if more direct. What do Nigerians and other Africans call this video-movie movement? Nollywood.

On the other hand, alternative media might also be scrutinized for their limited potential to create or trigger positive engagement. In this

context the line dividing “old” from “new” media when used to promote the participatory, democratic potential of new media, fails to explicitly scrutinize the limitations of new media. From this perspective mechanisms that are supposedly conducive to the democratization of society are seen as those which can also function as mechanisms for the exclusion of citizens, for example in the case of the spread of racism and xenophobia via new media. The pervasiveness and potential power of “nano-media” do not at all times necessarily emerge for good. Were the mass of audio-cassette sermons of the Ayatollah Khomeini circulated in Iran in the late 1970s, which helped his supporters rise to the leadership of the diverse anti-Shah movement and establish a brutal theocracy, positive? Were the fledgling Nazi party’s alternative media in the 1920s, which helped it assume the leadership of extreme reaction and eventually convulse the planet into slaughter of scores of million human beings, positive? Are the extreme right alliances’ web production spreading racism and xenophobia, positive? We need, nonetheless, to recognize that these too are indices of the potential impact of small-scale media.

In the essays in this collection, a series of writers endeavor to get to grips with the multiple facets of “nano-media.” Some of their observations are very much at the conceptual level, others specific to a place and a time, while others blend both approaches. We hope that readers will find their perceptions deepened and their questions sharpened as a result.

Hanno Hardt considers the decline of conversation and argues that, with the introduction of new technologies that separated the functions of seeing and hearing, new relations between people and the world were established, and the technology of today, like the Internet, mobile phone or the computer, further emphasize that effect. The latter, in contrast to radio or television, are not reaching a mass audience but are meant to serve the individual—although it is worth remembering that listservs and blogs, for example, especially when used for mobilizing social movements, are a kind of some-to-many or even many-to-many, as distinct from one-source-to-many technology. The consequence is that barriers are built around subjects, and the space which should be filled with different voices and cultural diversity is emptied out. The new form of conversation is nothing like what we know from the past. It is not a path to the truth where differences are negotiated and different voices are given ways to be heard; it is dangerously close to a set of monologues whose emancipatory potential is just an illusion. It is the fundamental notion of dialogue that Hardt raises. He goes back to Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*,

and he further illustrates the importance of conversation and its crucial role in life from Marx, Dewey, Blumer and Mead.

Hardt, in a contribution that poses fundamental issues of social communication and its ultimate potential for distortion, theorizes conversation as a dialogical practice that shapes reality and creates interactions between communicating people. But in the contemporary world it is not uncommon that being heard is more important than what is being said. The result is a cacophony of simultaneous monologues leading ultimately to uniformity and standardization, rather than an exchange of ideas between equals. Nowadays “reality emerges from an interaction between the self-interest of the media and the desire of the individual to remain in touch with the world, while mutuality is redefined as an economic or political operating condition rather than a social or cultural process of understanding.” Hardt claims that what really matters here is the realization that some form of conversation as human activity remains irreplaceable, since it is solely through conversation that people can confirm their own subjectivity and their own relation to the world.

Chris Atton’s chapter examines relations between alternative and mass media, where the argument is put forward that alternative media scholars should give more consideration to the nature of alternative media practice as known to us from studies of the mass media. Atton proposes that it is only possible to bridge the gaps created by “celebratory and uncritical academic discourse” adopted by alternative media studies by linking theories that take into account news framing, representation, discourse, ethics and norms, together with those of journalism studies. Arguing that alternative media news production should be theorized as journalism practice, the chapter discusses three arenas of practice and/or ethical issues in alternative journalism: sourcing, representation and objectivity. While mainstream media employ experts for sourcing, alternative media engage story-telling by ordinary people, who set the terms of reference for readers as well as pose challenges to “expert” journalists and by doing so suggest new ways of thinking about and producing journalism.

Alternative media also pose challenges to the dominant representational practices of mainstream news. Atton underscores how alternative media news delivery practices disrupt the professional ideal of objectivity. By recognizing the political dimensions of objectivity, practitioners of alternative journalism challenge central assumptions: that it is possible in the first place to separate facts from values, and secondly that it is morally and politically preferable to do so. He also argues, perhaps

over-optimistically, that representation of, for example, ethnic minorities and of gays and lesbians is rarely an ethical challenge to alternative journalists, since they are already operating from within a progressive environment where discriminatory practices largely do not arise. (Nonetheless, we need to exercise caution in presuming that alternative media are automatically a progressive “safe zone” where social class, racism and the patriarchy have been successfully expelled—Independent Media Centers in the USA, for example, are quite often white, male and university-educated, not because of active discrimination, but rather because their organizational practices represent a subculture of free time for endless argument that excludes tired, busy working people and also can be implicitly masculinist in style.)

John Downing starts by addressing the achievements and issues of social movement media and gives his vote for Barber’s “strong democracy.” Social movements as contemporary agents of change, which give us actual alternatives to formal corporate democracy, are the nearest to the notion of democratic global power that currently exists, he argues. And much of a social movement’s potential depends upon social movement media: from the simplest techniques, such as graffiti and popular song, all the way through to technically complex formats such as video.

The chapter also deals with ideas expressed in Hardt and Negri’s *Multitude*, and various essays by Lovink in which he deploys the term “tactical media,” that have recently become iconic among a number of democracy and global justice movement activists. Downing argues that their analyses “largely offer an unproductive dead end to the search for global justice and democracy.” Hardt and Negri are far too loose, almost mystical, when using the notion of communication, for example failing even to register “the significance of the planet’s multiple languages in the global communication process they claim to be underway.” Following Hardt and Negri might mean overlooking one crucial thing: the communication process is central, but the language issue is critical. If there is no information in an understandable language, that does not mean that there is no information at all. The argument furthermore explores different issues that are important for developing strong media as integral to strong democracies: the relationship between movements to reform mainstream media, and social movement media; the relation between information and imagination; the relation between Internet and cell phone mobilization tactics, and social movement media; the centrality of popularising science and technology; and the issue of scale. If we take just the last one, “judging social movement media achievements solely by



measuring their small audience or their ephemeral lives,” says Downing, “is akin to judging nanotechnologies by their size and finding them to be failures.”

Discussing the experience of neo-liberalism and the lack of political community, Natalie Fenton explores how media have become a central arena where definitions of reality are posed by privileged elites. New technologies set aside the values of professional journalism, and commercial pressure gives preference to spectacle over journalistic responsibility and integrity. Resistance is a commonly used term, but it is rarely extended “into the actual development and deliberation of a new politics and the world of the political public sphere.” Fenton brings into focus the notion of resistance, or of a political project that requires “a collective social and political imaginary that can offer a vision of a future worth aiming for.” But political hope in mediated political mobilization needs to be examined beyond the confines of media and communication studies. Fenton bases her approach to a reconsideration of the concept on the work of four theorists: Harvey, Bauman, Hardt and Negri.

Basically, Harvey believes in the necessity of utopian imagining against all who say there is no alternative. With Bauman, the focus is shifted from a better tomorrow to the happiness of today, while Hardt and Negri call for a concept of absolute democracy, the rule of everyone by everyone. Fenton opts for a political project where the notion of resistance in media and communication studies would engage not only in cultural studies but with the struggle to change the terms of political economy. Through a critical appraisal of these theorists, Fenton looks at ways in which new media may allow a re-imagining of hope for a constructive collective politics, so that a collective consciousness can be maintained and developed in this complex, confusing and contradictory tangle of mediation, politics, culture and community.

Taking a historical, comparative and theoretical approach, the chapter of Gabriele Hadl and Jo Dongwon traces the development of frames such as community, alternative, tactical, and autonomous media, and meta-frameworks such as democratization of communication, and communication rights for media by, for and of the people. Special attention is given to the “ideological baggage” of concepts currently used in policy and network practice in U.S., Korean and Japanese contexts. The analysis addresses the following questions: What is the difference between different approaches such as alternative and community media? In which contexts have they evolved? How do they account for the practices’ limitations, and how can they help bring out their democratic potential? Can

these frames respond to new challenges posed by evolving communication technologies and practices, the shifting notion of publicness in communication, and the encroachment of commercial and governmental interests? Gabriele Hadl and Jo Dongwon propose that much can be learned from existing attempts to formulate frameworks for media by, for and of the people, their successes as well as their conflicts and limitations.

To provide a map and a critical evaluation of conceptual framings for media activism, the author reviews research primarily in English, but takes into account the historical contributions of Latin American research in the 1970s–80s and 1990s–2005 Korean media activism. The analysis shows that there have been important developments towards formulating coherent alternatives to commercially or governmentally controlled media systems. However, too few of these have been documented and disseminated. In addition, these debates have been pursued among relatively disconnected and ghettoized groups of researchers and practitioners. This has resulted in a large number of “reinvented wheels” and a blurring of discourses that largely benefits more powerful interests bent on co-option of genuine alternatives. Urgent needs identified include creating a sustained discussion on theoretical issues and a publicly shared history of media by, for and of the people.

The chapter by Pantelis Vatikiotis proposes the conceptualization of a democratic public-mediated space, and evaluates theoretical discourses regarding vital aspects of such a space, and across various moments and agents of its constitution. Specifically, it draws on a line of approach that evaluates the interplay between public sphere and civil society as a discursive space for the realization of democratic processes. This process is addressed in terms of a pluralistic and active understanding of citizenship as a form of identity. From this perspective, the interplay between public sphere and civil society is evaluated along with the roles of difference and agency in enhancing and enriching the full potential of citizenship. While Fenton’s contribution to the discussion emphasizes the urgency of hope in constructing a collective political program, Vatikiotis’ chapter emphasizes the symbiosis between “invisible” quotidian actions, including in play, and potential expansion of the public sphere.

In regards to media, the article draws on various perspectives that have evaluated their role as enablers of the public sphere, helping to fulfill the principles of public/democratic communication. Addressing the dynamic interface between public sphere and civil society in terms of the representation and participation of different publics both through

and within the media, the chapter argues that we must engage with the plurality of media practices that are activated in the realm of civil society. Vatikiotis urges here an understanding of these media in relation to their contribution to, and intervention in, the quotidian, lived experience of alternative media's practices. These constitute significant sites for subjects to negotiate and renegotiate identities, cultures and lifestyles. The chapter proposes that such practices provide the space for new expressions of citizenship.

In Serbia, during the Milošević regime, media outside the control of the government were considered alternative or independent. Their influence and circulation were growing during the 1990s, and in the period preceding the political changes in the country in 2000, they were among the main pillars of the democratization processes. Larisa Ranković shows how these media are now trying to become commercially successful. Her chapter shows how the notion of the alternative in Serbia has mainly accompanied the development of the Internet, of different forms of online media with the lowest publishing costs and the easiest accessibility to the public. With the spread of content-related advertising provided by Google and other companies, it is possible to attract revenue and thus potentially support publication. While there are individual bloggers who deal in a skilled and attractive way with social and political issues, media, IT, and other buzz topics dominant in alternative media around the world, Ranković argues that it is still impossible to talk of any significant alternative media, as such, in Serbia. Web sites that provide a constant flow of information are usually the projects of youth groups or NGOs, which either fail to promote their ideas successfully or are short-lived. Of particular importance would be the coverage of topics that are poorly covered in the mainstream media: issues of culture, environmentalism, local communities and marginal groups. This has, however, still to happen in Serbia, and hopes for the future lie with the development of civic journalism related to alternative media in the country.

Ruth Heritage's chapter explores *Undercurrents*, a British video-activist collective that has been producing and distributing politically engaged direct action and alter-globalization videos since 1994. The alter-globalization movement, thrust into the public eye during the battle of Seattle (1999), marked a shift from local to global environmentalist actions. Part of this shift was an opening up of the Internet to organizational use by direct action groups, creating networks of political action. In the UK, during the 1990s, motorway protests, anti-Criminal Justice Act demonstrations, and other direct action projects similarly joined forces for the 18

June “carnival against capitalism” demonstrations in 2000. This period saw a mass emergence of video activism. Over the same period, British television saw a rise in the number of programs—docusoaps, reality TV, and first person filming—which placed individual citizens at the center of the schedules, a process facilitated by integration and mobilization of new technologies. New ICTs offer different forms of production and distribution, each contributing to a changing notion of citizenship.

However, activist video continues to comment—albeit in different forms and on different platforms—on activism, actions, and activist identity. *Undercurrents* provides us with one narrative or story about how one organization sought to construct a model of citizenship with a “strong democracy” content. *Undercurrents* negotiated mainstream television as an alternative public sphere, through the use of documentary, actuality, and reality TV tropes. Comparing video footage from BBC’s *Video Diaries* and *Crimewatch* with *Undercurrents*, Heritage notes how the latter project helped create an “*Undercurrents*” citizen, with a shared collective identity and boundaries. She also observes the potential limitations of such citizenship, through a discussion of video distribution and activist screenings, illustrated by *Undercurrents* footage.

We dedicate this introduction and this collection of essays to the memory of the late Andrej Pinter, who did a great deal to set up the conference “Alternative Media and New Public Settings” (13–14 October 2006, Ljubljana, Slovenia) at which they were first presented. His formidable intelligence and analytical insights were badly missed both in the conference itself and in putting this volume together. His very untimely death has robbed us all of an outstanding media researcher, and friend to many of us.

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