

## **Alternative Media**

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“Alternative Media” is a slippery term fraught with multiple meanings. Ranging from community radio to fan zines to news websites, it covers a wide gamut of media forms that challenge the status quo. There are at least two general definitions of alternative media. In its most expansive and popular use, the term “alternative media” includes all media that are somehow opposed to or in tension with mainstream media. The communications scholar James Hamilton argues that most definitions of alternative media casts mainstream media as “...maximizing audiences by appealing to safe, conventional formulas, and [alternative media] foregoing the comfortable, depoliticizing formulas to advocate programs of social change.” (p. 358). Hamilton and others have suggested this dichotomy is oversimplified. The radical media theorist John Downing argues that to speak of alternative media in this way is almost oxymoronic. “Everything, at some point,” he notes, “is alternative to something else” (p. ix). As with many cultural objects and practices, today’s alternative may be co-opted and re-appropriated to become tomorrow’s mainstream. Even the commercial penny press was initially an alternative medium to the partisan press. Exactly how alternative opposes mainstream media is where the second and more challenging definition lies. Defined too broadly or narrowly, it risks conceptual imprecision and limits the term’s usefulness. Complicating this definition are the various modifiers that frequently are folded into or used interchangeably with alternative media, including citizens, community, participatory, radical, and independent. To impose the master category of “alternative” onto all of these subgroups does violence to significant nuances.

Fortunately for this task, despite the generic qualities of its wider use, there are a number of recurring themes across competing definitions that allow for a more specific explication, albeit

with several important caveats. For example, several prominent theorists of alternative media define it as much by their organizational processes as by their front-end content. In other words, the ways in which the media are produced and the social relations they assist can be as important as the final media product. Often times, these social relations stress participatory processes and community involvement in media making. Chris Atton argues: “Alternative media...are crucially about offering the means for democratic communication to people who are normally excluded from media production” (p. 4). Similarly, James Hamilton synthesizes a number of theoretical threads in the following: “[Alternative media’s] collective value is in their exploration of new forms of organizing more participatory techniques of media and more inclusive, democratic forms of communication (p.373). According to this definition, alternative media allow those who are most often under- or misrepresented in mainstream media to tell their own stories through their own media. According to Atton, this media democratization process is indicated by several qualities, including non-commercial sites for distribution; transformed social relations, roles and responsibilities; and transformed communication processes (p. 27). A community radio station that has rotating leadership roles or a public access channel produced by a cooperatively run organization exemplifies these qualities.

Historically, alternative media have been a crucial resource for social movements and marginalized groups in the United States. Revolutionary pamphleteers helped fan the flames of independence against the British. A vibrant abolitionist press kept alive the anti-slavery movement for decades preceding the Civil War. Similarly, a popular working class press was integral to the burgeoning labor movement in the first half of the twentieth century. In the early 1900s, the advertising-supported socialist newspaper *The Appeal to Reason* reached nearly a million subscribers and helped advance the socialist candidate Eugene Debs’s presidential

ambitions. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, an ethnic press provided sustenance for various marginalized cultural groups. Likewise, an underground press helped sustain the civil rights movement and other activist groups during the 1960s.

More recently, the internet has complicated the binaries between alternative and mass media by lowering barriers to entry and enabling new network-based forms of media organizing. In the broader sense of “alternative media,” this simply may mean a wider distribution for non-mainstream political points of views, such as those found on [Alternet](#) or [Commondreams.org](#). In other cases, the political opportunities amplified by the internet are far more radical and democratizing. A classic example of the latter can be found in [Indymedia.org](#). Founded during the November 1999 World Trade Organization protests in Seattle, Indymedia allows anyone with internet access to “be the media” by uploading news content (print, photos, audio or video) to the website. Operated according to anarchic and radical democratic principles such as consensus-based decision-making, there are now as of January 2006 over 150 indymedia sites across six continents. With the explosion of the blogosphere, this kind of do it yourself (diy) media is increasingly commonplace. Taken as a whole, this subgroup of alternative media has sometimes been referred to as “cyberactivism” or simply “internet activism.” Whereas Indymedia is a radical leftwing organization, a conservative example is the grassroots conservative site, [Free Republic](#). In the fall of 2004, the latter gained notoriety during the “Rathergate” affair by targeting a news story by Dan Rather that relied on unverified documents criticizing President George W. Bush’s military service.

This brings us to an important question: What is the ideological dimension of alternative media? The ways in which alternative media challenge mainstream assumptions and rearrange social relationships often places them consciously or by default under the rubric of progressive

politics. But conservatives clearly make alternative media too. Christian Right groups increasingly use the internet to organize constituents, as does fringe rightwing white supremacist groups. By some measures, politically conservative groups and individuals dominate the blogosphere in terms of numbers and impact.

Other important questions remain. There are institutional questions of ownership, participation, and funding that expose the porous boundaries between mainstream and alternative media. For example, there is often an assumption that alternative media are small-scale, non-profit organizations independently owned and run on a volunteer and collective basis. Although many community media organizations do indeed operate in this fashion, this standard quickly falls apart when looking at any number of media organizations sometimes included in the expansive definition of “alternative media,” including the *Village Voice*, the British *Guardian*, public broadcasting, and even rightwing talk radio with its audience of millions.

The debate over the exact meaning of alternative media promises to continue. Broadly speaking, alternative media counter mainstream representations and assumptions. More specifically, alternative media suggests democratized media production that tends towards the non-commercial, the community based, and the marginalized. Moreover, technological changes like the internet will continue to destabilize our understandings about what constitutes alternative and mainstream media. In the final analysis, we must remember that, as with all concepts and categories, the map is not the territory, but merely an approximation.

### **Bibliography**

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