

**MEDIATION AND ALTERNATIVE MEDIA
OR, REIMAGINING THE CENTRE OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION
STUDIES**

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Introduction

Most accounts of media power forget what should be their starting-point. While the analysis of how media ownership and distribution is concentrated or how specific ideologies are reproduced or negotiated through the production and consumption of media texts are important, to start there is to lose sight of a dimension of power that is already in place before we get to those other details. I mean the fact that ‘symbolic power’ – that is, ‘the power of constructing reality’ (Bourdieu, 1991: 163-170), one’s own reality and that of others – is concentrated in one sector of society, not evenly distributed. This is a fact about most societies, but it takes a particular form in contemporary mediated societies, where symbolic power is concentrated particularly, although not of course exclusively, in media institutions, so that inequalities of symbolic power take the primary form of media power. Or, as the political theorist Alberto Melucci has put it (echoing, perhaps unwittingly, Paulo Freire): ‘the real

domination is today the exclusion from the power of naming' (Melucci, 1996: 179), that is naming social reality.

It only seems strange that critical media analysis (and in fact social theory generally) has neglected media power in this primary sense, until you remember that the effectiveness of media power depends partly on its being forgotten, on us taking it for granted that it is to media institutions, not elsewhere, that we look for our social facts and most of our credible fictions.¹ Media power is a central part of contemporary societies' 'habitus' (to use another useful term of Bourdieu: 1977: 78), their 'history turned into nature'.

This is why it is easy to overlook, or dismiss, the significance of those who refuse to take media power for granted and instead contest it, believing that they too have the right to share in society's resources for representing itself. It is easy therefore to overlook the practices of alternative media (Atton, forthcoming), radical media (Downing, 1984, 2000) or citizens' media (Rodriguez, 2001), and with it the tradition of media research that has insisted on those practices' importance. But it is no longer (if it ever was) excusable.

When there is a crisis in the idea of democratic citizenship (Wolin, 1992) at the heart of the mediated societies (the USA and Britain) whose political leaders claim loudly their right to act as global democracy's armed representatives, then it is time to re-examine the assumption that centralised media are, necessarily or simply, good for democracy and citizenship. We can only do this if, as academics, we make central to media analysis the study of media power - as a systematic structure of symbolic

inclusion and exclusion – and how media power, in spite of everything, gets contested through alternative media practice. But this is only to catch up rather late with what media activists have long been doing.

In this paper, I want to start by describing how I myself caught up late with alternative media, and from there explain in more detail the particular perspective on alternative media which I have tried to develop: this will be illustrated with brief examples from my own empirical work. Then, in the second half of the paper, with a wider audience also in mind - that is, those who do not start out from a sense that alternative media are important – I want to run through a number of arguments for the centrality, not marginality, of alternative media to the agenda of media and communication studies today.

How I got here

It is an honour to take part in this preconference. I feel this particularly as a theorist, not a practitioner, of alternative media, indeed a theorist whose route to studying alternative media has been indirect, and relatively recent. I owe an explanation, if only a brief one, of how I got here, how I came to see alternative media as central to my work.

My entry into academic writing was itself quite indirect, through contacts I made on London's experimental music scene in the early 1990s, when I was active as a member of the London Musicians' Collective, an organisation on the fringes of the commercial music world. Although that whole scene has its own discourse that

contested the symbolic power of the mainstream music industries (see for example Prevost, 1995), its importance for my later academic career seemed initially only to be the musician/academic contact who introduced me to studying media. It was only later, when reading John Downing's chapter on art and media in *Radical Media* (second edition), that I saw for the first time that there might be a more substantial connection between my academic and musical trajectories, and realised that, common to both, was an interest in where symbolic boundaries get drawn and symbolic hierarchies entrenched.

From early on in my media research, I felt unhappy with the attempt of many writers to study media in isolation and to place so much political weight on the act of reading mainstream media texts. I was interested instead in the media as a broader process which cut across the social terrain, without necessarily passing through the neat circuit of 'producer-text-reader'. I got interested in what happens when art practice becomes closely involved with media representations and interested also in the communication practice of protesters, who spoke up in public space, but usually without the sanction of media coverage: for example the anti-road protests in early 1990s Britain, such as those in Leytonstone, East London against the extension of the M11 motorway (see Aufheben, 1998). Gradually, through this and other work, for example on the symbolic practices of the women's peace camp at Greenham Common (below), a larger theme emerged: to study media as a quite specific process of power, that cast light in some directions (for those who have media resources) and cast shadows in other directions (on those who do not). From this perspective, alternative media practice is not marginal to media analysis, but a crucial site where the unifying

conditions of media power are actively contested, more openly than usually happens when we sit down and watch the television in the corner.

Yet I found no work within media studies that saw media in this way, until I read Jesus Martin-Barbero's *Communication, Culture and Hegemony* (translated, into English, 1993). Martin-Barbero's idea of studying 'mediation', rather than simply media – mediation as the mass of processes of doing things with particular media technologies having particular representational effects – was crucial for me, since it confirmed that to analyse media you did not have to start by mystifying them. Media was a process, a very powerful and complex process, which certain people performed at particular places and times, with effects on other places and times - no more, no less. It was a process to be studied with open eyes, wherever it occurred and without any presumptions that only mediation from this (central) place matters. For the first time, I felt that my broader research plans on media power were not madness, but could legitimately be imagined.

Why tell this private story, of little interest in itself? Because it illustrates the pressures operating against the serious study of alternative media, and indeed against the study of media (wherever they occur) as processes of mediation. Those pressures derive directly from the naturalised power of media institutions and were, I came to realise, part of what we need to analyse when we think about media power, not least because these pressures have colonised the field of media studies itself.

To study alternative media seriously, and not out of incidental curiosity, is to view society's mediated landscape from a different perspective, which refuses to take for

granted its current centralization. This is not easy, any more than it is easy to think about social change in other areas. It is difficult to do utopian thinking in the sense insisted up on by Ernst Bloch, to think concretely about the ‘not yet’.² As Ruth Levitas (1990: 265, quoted Giroux, 2001: 19) argues, ‘the main reason why it has become so difficult to locate utopia in a future credibly linked to the present by a feasible transformation is that our images of the present do not identify agencies and processes of change’. We need then different images of our mediated present, which do identify agencies and processes of change, not least in alternative media practice that contests how the images of our present get made. As I argue in the second part of this paper, a number of new forces are now emerging which require us to do just that.

Alternative to What?

I am using the term ‘alternative media’, but we can also talk about ‘radical media’ (Downing, 2000) or ‘citizens media’ (Rodriguez, 2001): I do not want to spend much time on definitional questions, as these are secondary to the question of how we engage with the body of resistive media practice that exists beyond the media mainstream. But, for the sake of clarity, I must just mention why I hold to the term ‘alternative media’ and in what sense I use it.

By contrast with John Downing’s term ‘radical alternative media’ – where ‘radical’ is used with a specifically political sense, that is, media which express an ‘alternative vision’ to hegemonic views of the world (2000: v) – I would prefer, perhaps artificially, to leave politics to one side when defining what it is we study. We cannot avoid political value-judgements in the broad sense – and my interest in alternative

media rests on a commitment to study the effects of power and inequality – but I have opted for the simple term ‘alternative media’ because it is at a greater distance from specific political judgements, contentious as they inevitably are in particular places and times.

But, if we bracket for the moment issues of politics, the question arises: ‘alternative’ to what? Not necessarily alternative to mainstream political positions (as I have just mentioned), nor necessarily alternative to mainstream media operations, since I will mention later on an example from my own research of an activist – the Umbrella Man - who is not strictly producing anything that circulates outside mainstream media, yet, who is definitely contesting the normal conditions of media production. By ‘alternative media’, I mean instead practices of symbolic production which contest (in some way) media power i.e. the concentration of symbolic power in media institutions. This definition avoids, I believe, the objections to the term ‘alternative media’ which John Downing (2000: ix) and Clemencia Rodriguez, 2001: 20) make. It is also flexible enough to include activities which are not strictly media production, but, instead, operate disruptively within the frame of mainstream media outputs (the Umbrella Man) or to construct a different kind of symbolic authority altogether (the women at Yellow Gate, Greenham Common): for both, see the next section.

In practice, because mainstream media are so closely tied to values and beliefs which are mainstream in a social and political sense, those who want to challenge consensus will often need to confront media power, and themselves become involved in some kind of media activism. So my use of the term ‘alternative media’ need not change what we study very much. I am trying however to define the area in a way that does

not necessarily depend on where you stand in the political spectrum, although it does presume a wider concern with the politics of speech and the conditions which must be met for an effective democracy to exist. The importance of this - and it is more than just a definitional point - will emerge later when I discuss why alternative media matter now for the whole field of media and political analysis.

The 'Weapons of the Weak'

I want first though to bring out a little more the implications of the definition I have given to the term 'alternative media', looking briefly at two cases from my own fieldwork: they are extreme in the sense that they definitely involve resistance to media power, yet they do not involve media production in the usual sense, because they are practices developed without media production resources being available. I am not claiming they are typical cases; rather they illustrate the outer limits of alternative media analysis, which it is important not to forget.

Yellow Gate, Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp

The first example relates to research I did about the women who stayed on at the women's peace camp outside the US Air Force base at Greenham Common (1981-2000), that in the early 1980s achieved wide, even international, prominence (see further, Couldry, 1999 and 2000: 157-61). The base became controversial, because for some time it was where US Cruise missiles were kept. It became the focus of a major public conflict on nuclear weapons between women of a wide range of social

backgrounds and the British state. It also received considerable media coverage, locally, nationally and globally.

I am going to look at a very specific aspect of what happened at Greenham, but first I must give a sense of the complex meanings which the camp and the protests there had. Greenham was a site of great 'discursive dissonance' (Roseneil, 1995: 143), disruptive on many levels at once. In spatial terms, the camp was established at a boundary of both physical barrier that represented also the imaginary boundary between the world of 'ordinary life' and the barely known world in which nuclear weapons move (Wilson, 1992: 274-5). In social terms, many divisions were at stake: formal divisions within social space (woman versus man, 'ordinary' person versus government) as well as the mass of petty distinctions mobilized when 'others' are marked off as threatening 'outsiders'. Greenham was also a 'liminal' space in Victor Turner's (1974) sense where social norms were suspended and contested: both the 'normal' domestic relations between women, their male partners and children, and the norms of compulsory heterosexuality. More than that, the very transferral of domestic life into public space was itself of liminal significance. Greenham women disrupted the gendered geography of public and private spheres, first by being women displaced from the private space of the home, and then by being women (and private persons) living beside the masculine, public, emphatically non-domestic space of a nuclear weapons base (Cresswell, 1996: 97-100).

Given the complexity of these disruptions, it is easy to overlook another, media-related, dimension of disruption which is suggested by Sasha Roseneil's comment in her excellent study of the Peace Camp:

She [Greenham woman] was a woman who transgressed boundaries between public and private sphere: she made her home in public, in the full glare of the world's media, under the surveillance of the state. (Roseneil, 1995: 155-6, added emphasis)

By insisting on making their point about weapons, not from a television studio but from the place where the weapons were, Greenham women challenged the assumption that effective national debate was possible without experiencing the weapons' physical presence. They therefore challenged the assumption implicit in all media debates, that audiences can adequately 'participate' from the distance of their own homes, watching the representations made by others. By transferring their domestic life into mediated public space, and making that performance of domestic life into a public statement, Greenham women turned inside out that regular pattern whereby domestic public non-mediated space (the place where you watch from) and non-domestic public, mediated space (places you watch) are separate spheres. The Peace Camp was at the same time a domestic local space where women lived and a public mediated space of national significance. Perhaps the mock television set which women at the Camp's Blue Gate made can be read as a humorous reflection on this: 'we had a television made out of a cardboard box, with a piece of wire for an aerial' (Jenny List, quoted in Roseneil, 1995: 79).

There is a great deal more I could say about the implications of this public protest - this mocking domesticity performed in the media glare - and about the whole transformation which participating in the protest represented for many women (the

shock of finding out that the other women involved were not the media stereotype of ‘weird’ protesters, but ‘ordinary people’ like themselves: see Couldry, 1999, especially 346-7).

Instead I want to reflect on a much later time towards the end of the camp’s history, when most women had long since left, and indeed the weapons themselves had been removed and the base itself closed, but a few women remained at the Yellow Gate camp.³ In 1996 I interviewed those who still remained about why they were there and the communication strategy which underlay their continued resistance. The most striking thing to emerge was that, although they now received almost no media coverage, their actions still involved a strategy which contested media power.

Through a number of actions – entering the nearby Aldermaston nuclear weapons establishment, speeches defending themselves in court actions for such illegal entrances, writing messages on the weapons’ hangars, while the weapons still remained – they communicated their abhorrence of nuclear weapons and the more general militarism, in the full knowledge of the media’s silence about them. As Katrina Howse, one member of the camp put it:

There’s always been a core of women who feel it as a moral imperative to take action, to take non-violent direct action, because the situation is intolerable, on a mental level the situation of having nuclear weaponry . . . and they [the state] have never broken that core . . . of belief that, for a small minority of women, taking non-violent direct action in a consistent solid way is always better than acceptance . . . [Resisting action is] actually a daily commitment and it reflects our

way of seeing the world which is not negotiable . . . it's not negotiable with the state or the state's media, nor with any one else . . . It's a resisting women's way of seeing the world. (interview September 1996)

Another member of Yellow Gate, Aniko Jones, put the relationship specifically to media power more directly: 'we have to get to people on our own terms and we have to give out information and we have to be the sources of that information, not the media' (interview September, 1996).

Here, in the absence of significant media coverage and knowing that they were invisible to most people – in the centre of a 'spiral of silence' (Noelle-Neuman, 1974) – they expressed in its direct form the principle of resisting media power: the idea that 'we', not media institutions, should be the source of information. This is, in a sense, the outer limit of alternative media practice, whose importance is not in its success as alternative media – which is highly debatable – but simply in its showing fact that it was possible, imaginable.

The Umbrella Man

A second example of the outer limits of alternative media practice comes from a UK social activist I interviewed in 1996 and 1997, who calls himself The Umbrella Man, because of the umbrella hat covered with campaign stickers, which he often wears (see further Couldry, 2000: 164-168 and 2001). He is a pensioner who retired early though ill health, having worked as a carpenter for a London council. He was an active trade unionist, and is now involved in supporting campaigns, such as those of

the UK public service worker union Unison. He is involved in important local campaigning, using the local press, particularly on disability, mobility and pensioner issues. But he has also been actively involved, as a supporter rather than organiser, of most of the significant social campaigns of recent years in Britain: the anti-road protests, the protests against live animal exports, the Disability Action Network's campaigns for disability rights, and so on.

My interest in him stemmed not so much from his 'politics', but from my interest in the strategy he adopted in relation to media power. He left school early and would not claim himself to be an articulate spokesperson (although he has often been invited onto television daytime talk shows, and the like). He would not describe himself as 'political' as such, and he is not affiliated to any political organisation. Nor is he a media activist in the normal sense: he has no media resources, no camera, no significant media connections, although over time he has built up good connections with his local newspapers. His main tactic, in relation to national issues, is to stand outside Parliament or government buildings on days when cameras are likely to be present (for example, Budget Days, when the government announces its plans for next year's public finances) with a placard, and dressed to attract camera attention: to 'lurk' (as it is put in the celebrity world) in the image frame in order to insinuate his own message into mainstream media narratives that are already going to be broadcast.

Yet his alternative media practice – if I can call it that – is clearly articulated as a challenge to the operations of media power. Here he is describing to me an incident one Budget Day when he tried to intervene in the standard interviews with members of parliament reacting to the Budget:

I decided to do something different on my own, all the cameras came out, they all went to [College Green, outside Houses of Parliament, Westminster] and I thought right, let's go for it. And I've got this little push trolley . . . that the old people carry and I've got all my [Unison] balloons] and boards . . . so I crept across and all these cameras shot up as soon as they saw this Father Christmas coming along the footpath, right? And the trouble was they were picking me up and forgetting [the MPs] who were in front of their camera, so the MPs didn't like it . . . the camera going onto me and not them, that's what it's all about. (interview, February 1997, quoted in Couldry, 2000: 167, added emphasis)

The point of this brief example – and of course it needs more detailed context than I have space for here – is not to claim the effectiveness of the Umbrella Man's practice, as alternative media, let alone as formal politics; it is neither, strictly speaking. And yet it is an attempt to challenge the monopoly of the camera, and the privilege of those who are the usual objects of its gaze. As James Scott (1985) has argued, we must not dismiss the 'weapons of the weak' just because they appear weak, cut off from wider structures of power, in this case the structures of media power. Because that is precisely their significance, as registers (in reverse, as it were) of the vastness of power differentials. There is perhaps a larger shadow zone, outside the formal space even of alternative media production proper, where media power is contested in various ways, maybe unsuccessfully. This field of activities where people engage in 'renegotiations of their symbolic environments' (as Clemencia Rodriguez has put it: 2001: xi) is large. And it is this whole field, as John Downing's vast and rich study (2000) also brings out very clearly, that, as researchers, we need to study.

Symbolic Conflict and the Democratic Deficit

It is time, however, to broaden my argument and to explain why, now in particular, alternative media are central to the agenda of media and communications studies. The argument derives from alternative media's position at the intersection of a number of important debates about democracy and media, which can no longer be ignored by policymakers, political theorists or media analysts.

First, there is a growing crisis among policy makers in so-called 'developed' countries over whether the preconditions for a satisfactory and effective democracy are fulfilled; even if arguably they are met now, there are fears that some clearly identifiable trends ensure that they will no longer be met in future. Such fears underlie the anxious debates over the 'digital divide', for example, at the World Economic forum in Davos and in US, EU and Commonwealth circles.

The connections between the 'digital divide' and purely economic concerns about the viability of e-commerce are clear enough (see for example, Zerdick 2000, ch. 4): unless active Internet use rises well in excess of current levels, there may be no sustainable financial basis for e-commerce, for all the claims that e-commerce is the future of the global economy. This is, however, just one of a number of connected problems which go to the heart not only of our economic, but our political, future. Already many of us live in a world saturated by media messages, too many messages for us to deal with. In this world, cynicism about what information does reach us is hardly surprising and we must ask whether we get the types of information that we

need if we are to be active citizens. The problem was vividly summed up by Pere Iborra, a Catalan television producer interviewed by Clemencia Rodriguez: ‘today we are invaded by so much macro-information that people know more about what’s going on in the Gulf than whether or not their street is being paved and this is absurd’ (Rodriguez, 2001: 88). The question of what information flows reach us and how we select from them can only become more urgent as channels increase with the much-heralded shift to media digitalization and pathways through the information jungle become more individualised. The era of ‘personal’ ‘interactive’ media is only unproblematic at the level of the most superficial rhetoric, for example this typical comment from the British Government’s recent paper announcing its media strategy for the next few years:

‘[digital] television can become the information and entertainment centre of the home with two-way communication – the days are numbered in which a television is the passively watched box in the corner of the living room.’ (Department of Trade and Industry/ Department of Culture, Media and Society, 2000: 26)

What ‘information’ and what sort of ‘two-way communication’ is never clarified, and the easy rhetoric of imagining the shift from ‘passive’ to ‘active’ media use ignores the crucial question about so-called ‘active’ media consumption: what ‘fields of action . . . are opened up or closed down’ by this supposed revolution in media use? (cf Garnham, 2000: 118). It would be optimistic in the extreme to believe that in the digital age media markets will encourage a shift towards greater news consumption, for example!

There is real uncertainty, then, about whether ‘the media’ (that is, society’s central, and centrally organised, media) will continue to deliver a ‘national audience’ for politics, if they ever did. It can be argued that the most prominent media outputs of our age (such as Disney fictions) ‘are bought at the expense of citizens’ sense of agency and resistance, as the past [let alone the present and future, NC] is purged of its subversive elements and translated into a nostalgic celebration of entrepreneurship and technological process’ (Giroux, 1999: 55), which is already a problem for political education. But the problem is even more fundamental than that; it is a question of the continued legitimacy of political authority itself.

If the digital media age (in the US or the UK, say) can no longer deliver even a plausible assumption that a national audience for politics is out there watching or listening, then, as election voting rates also decline to 50% or less, the assumption that elected governments have social legitimacy will become increasingly difficult to sustain. Who exactly is national or federal government addressing when it claims to ‘speak to the nation’?

From here a connection can be made to a long-running crisis in political theory about the nature of democracy. In the 1980s and 1990s attention was increasingly given, not to the conduct of policy and political institutions, but to the preconditions for democratic public life *per se*. Sheldon Wolin, for example, has identified both a crisis in the liberal notion of citizenship (1992) and the withering of the notion of the ‘political’ (1995). Two important traditions of analysis coincide here, which have not always been in dialogue with each other: the post-structuralist theory of ‘radical democracy’ (Mouffe, 1992; McClure, 1992) and Habermasian models of ‘deliberative

democracy' (Benhabib, 1992, 1995). For my purposes, the differences of theoretical formulation between them are probably less important than the similarities, since both start from the premise that the state and national parliament's are not the automatic reference-point or sole focus of the political (compare Habermas, 1995: 28 and Benhabib, 1995: 73 with McClure, 1992: 121). Common ground has emerged in which the future of democratic politics is seen to depend on constructing a complex, open-ended space for the mutual recognition on which citizenship is based. That space is not one fixed space, but an 'interlocking net' of public association (Benhabib, 1995: 73), based on everyone's recognition of each other's right to speak and be heard – what Benhabib calls the 'principle of egalitarian reciprocity' (1995: 78) – and the shared commitment 'to find terms to which others can agree' (Cohen, 1995: 113). Crucial to that space is people's ability to exhibit their 'subject experience to other subjects' (Young, 1995: 131), to recognise each other as 'full participants in social interaction' (Fraser, 2000: 113). That requires, however, recognising the limits that prestructure existing communicative spaces, the way they work to exclude some and foreground others (Young, 1995; Fraser, 1992). If those limits are to be addressed, then, as Anne Phillips (1992), has argued, we need to pay as much attention to 'the politics of presence' as to the politics of policy making: who is effectively 'present' in the public arena and who is not?

What is striking, however, is the lack of explicit attention among political theorists, whether of the 'radical citizenship' or the 'deliberative democracy' traditions, to media.⁴ The question of what media are needed if the preconditions for genuine democracy are to be fulfilled is left unanswered, whether because it is assumed that existing centralised media in practice are doing a good job (Habermas, 1992: 438-

439) or that media are not important enough for separate analysis, both questionable assumptions. It is only when one turns to certain media theorists that democratic citizenship starts to get defined in ways that explicitly address what resources media provide, or should provide, for citizenship (Murdock, 1999: 11-12; Rodriguez, 2001: 23).

It should be clear, however, that we cannot adequately articulate a 'politics of presence' without thinking about who has control of the means by which people make themselves 'present' for others, as participants in public space. This means taking seriously the symbolic exclusions which operate within the mediated public sphere: the media's regulation of who is normally seen as a political or social actor and who is not and the pervasive hierarchy which I have argued elsewhere is maintained between 'media people' and so-called 'ordinary people' (Couldry, 2000: 44-50). It also means taking seriously people's attempts to contest those exclusions and hierarchies, not least by becoming media producers themselves.

Alternative media practice is a rich source of insight here, precisely because it is there that the usual concentration of symbolic resources gets contested, and new terms of access negotiated. Here for example is Napoleon Williams of Black Liberation Radio in Illinois linking such symbolic hierarchies (or rather, their removal) and the establishment of a genuine public sphere:

We're not in it to make celebrities out of each other or to put anybody down, but to simply let people make a decision on the information that's given them. (interview in Sakolsky and Dunifer, 1998: 109).

Important also are the visions now developing of new types of communication network between social activists that might operate outside the ambit of mainstream media, using the Internet: for example SubComandante Marcos' vision of an 'alternative communication network' (discussed in Ford and Gil, 2000: 226 and Rodriguez, 2001: 155). There is a great deal, surely, to be learned also from detailed research into the mediation practices emerging under the aegis of 'digital divide' policies across the world: practices which are not necessarily 'radical media' but, in terms of their participants, represent an alternative certainly to the existing concentration of media power and resources.⁵ In each case, the long tradition of researching alternative media and participatory media has much to offer today's debates about what media contribute to the possibilities of genuine democratic public life.

Why then have these connections been ignored for so long? The reason is not just the neglect by political theory and social theory of media *per se*. Just as unhelpful has been the belief (implicit or explicit) by many media theorists, even those deeply concerned with the mediated public sphere that alternative media are an inconsequential sideshow, a romantic indulgence (see explicitly, Garnham, 2000: 68).⁶ This stand-off from alternative media by most media and communications analysts is no longer good enough. Not only does it ignore recent re-theorizations of the media sphere as multi-centered, leaving plenty of room for 'civic media' (Curran, 1996: 108-09; cf Dahlgren, 1995: 155-157) not centralised in their production or distribution. It also fails to deal with some of the most important symbolic conflicts of our time, such as the events developing out of the anti-WTO protests at Seattle.

Conclusion

In concluding, let me put my argument for the centrality of alternative media for media and communication studies as directly and briefly as I can:

1. We face a potential atrophy of political space, linked to:
2. an increasing inability of centralised media to guarantee the shared attention of potential citizens to political debate.
3. If the response to 1. must be to engage people more as citizens, then the question of whether, and how, media audiences can become more active as media producers cannot be ignored either. As Clemencia Rodriguez has argued, actively mediating the world is a way of enacting citizenship (2001: 20).
4. It follows that both political theory and policy analysis need to think about the conditions under which a genuinely active (that is, productive) ‘audience’ is possible, which means that:
5. if media and communication studies as a subject is to contribute to our thinking beyond the current crisis of mediated politics, then it must start taking alternative media seriously. It must begin to address the full range of mediating practices in society (and the struggles that underlie them), not just those which pass for the mainstream.

This is not to romanticise alternative media, but rather to reject the reification of the media’s separation from their audiences (which alternative media theorists have always railed against) as an absolute necessity, part of the irreversible centralising

sweep of modernity. Of course the market strives to define media consumers' sphere of action as narrowly as possible, and mainstream media outputs are functionally embedded in the infrastructure of contemporary societies. But functional necessity is different from legitimacy, and the legitimacy of media power is far from straightforward, especially when the legitimacy of political structures is itself under threat.

To challenge media power is not irrelevant dreaming; it is part of reflecting on who we are and who we can be. Paulo Freire wrote (1972: 61) that 'to exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new naming. Human beings are not built in silence, but in work, and work, in action-reflection'. Where society's resources to reflect upon and name its realities are unequally distributed, that inequality is an ethical and political issue to be contested, and those contests must be studied, if we are to understand the place of media in our societies, whether for ill or for good. We must, whether as theorists, or practitioners of alternative media (or both), 'work towards universalising the conditions of access to the universal' (Bourdieu, 1998). We can no longer therefore allow the study of alternative media to remain in the shadows.

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¹ For a more detailed excavation of why media power gets taken-for-granted, see Couldry (2000: chapters 1-3).

² Here I must acknowledge with thanks the inspiration of an as yet unpublished essay by Henry Giroux (2001).

³ The history of the Camp and its rival gates is complex and disputed. I do not want to take a position on that here; see for further discussion, Couldry (1999: 340-341).

⁴ John Downing makes a similar comment in relation to the earlier phase of 'new social movement' theory (Downing, 2000: 40). The same neglect is quite pervasive in fact: media feature hardly at all in such widely differing considerations of democratic politics as Fraser (2000) and Unger (1998).

⁵ For example, the Kothmale UNESCO funded radio station that is facilitating the spread of Internet and digital media skills in a poor rural area of Sri Lanka (Arnaldo, 2001).

⁶ Corner (1995), while not so direct, pays little attention to alternative media in his important and subtle discussion of the mediated public sphere.