Approaching Alternative Media: Theory and Methodology

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Preliminaries

In this paper I propose a theory of alternative and radical media that is not limited to political and 'resistance' media but which may also account for newer cultural forms such as zines and hybrid forms of electronic communication. It draws principally on the theoretical 'sketches' of Downing (1984), Dickinson (1997) and Duncombe (1997) and expands their work to propose a model that privileges the transformatory potential of the media as reflexive instruments of communication practices in social networks: there is a focus on process and relation.

Alternative and radical media hardly appear in the dominant theoretical traditions of media research. This is surprising, since some theoretical accounts appear to have space for them. The classic Marxist analysis of the media contains within it the seeds of such a space, in that alternative media may be considered as offering radical, anti-capitalist relations of production often coupled to projects of ideological disturbance and rupture. The Gramscian notion of counter-hegemony is discernible through a range of radical media projects (and not only on the obvious places such as the working-class newspapers (Allen, 1985 and Sparks, 1985) and radical socialist publications (Downing, 1984). Attempts to theorise and develop conceptual frameworks for alternative and radical media alone are even sparser. The Frankfurt School appear to have supported an alternative press through Adorno's assertion that the culture industry was best combated by 'a policy of retreatism in relation to the

media which, it was argues, were so compromised that they could not be used by oppositional social forces' (cited in Bennett, 1982: 46.) Adorno found the mimeograph 'the only fitting … unobtrusive means of dissemination' to be preferred over the bourgeois-tainted printing press (*ibid*.).

Enzensberger (1976) has proposed a politically emancipatory use of media that is characterised by 1) interactivity between audiences and creators, 2) collective production and 3) a concern with everyday life and the ordinary needs of people. Denis McQuail has configured this as an extreme of the liberal-pluralist scale, but doubts whether the model is able to withstand such a radical reconception:

> we are now speaking of a version of relationships yet another step further from the notion of dominant media, in which people using small-scale media prevail and large media institutions and undifferentiated content can no longer be found.
> (McQuail, 1987: 88)

The range, number and diversity of alternative media in all its forms (printed and electronic) and perspectives (single-person zines, large-scale working-class newspapers, radical community newspapers, magazines of sexual politics, anarchist *samizdats*) suggest the theory of liberal pluralism pushed to its limits. A model of the media where 'people using small-scale media prevail' need not be the product of idealism or entail the overthrow of large-scale media; we may find spaces in which small-scale media already prevail. In a revised edition of McQuail (1987) we find a 'democratic-participant' model (again based on Enzensberger) that is founded on the use of communications media 'for interaction and communication in small-scale settings of community, interest group and subculture' that favour 'horizontal patterns of interaction' where 'participation and interaction are key concepts' (McQuail, 1994: 132). This theory is only superficially limned: nowhere (not even in Enzensberger) is it fully developed. From McQuail (1987) we may also take a warning that perhaps it is more useful to find theoretical purchase for alternative and radical media not from existing accounts of dominant media, but from accounts of the media that provide

opposition to that domination. Here I propose a theory of alternative and radical media that proceeds from these accounts. The theory will not be limited to political and 'resistance' media: the intention is to develop a model that will also be applicable to artistic and literary media (video, music, mail art, creative writing), as well as to the newer cultural forms such as zines and hybrid forms of electronic communication (ICTs). Even within a single area of alternative media there is much heterogeneity (of styles, of contributions, of perspectives).

We might consider this range of production as a Foucauldian 'insurrection of subjugated knowledges' (Foucault, 1980: 81). The range of voices that is able to speak directly about these 'subjugated knowledges' moves closer to a situation where 'the Other' is able to represent itself, where analogues of Spivak's (1988) 'native informants' are able to speak with their own 'irreducibly heterogeneous' voices. Alternative and radical media might then be considered a 'heteroglossic (multiple-voiced) text' (Buckingham and Sefton-Green, cited in Gauntlett, 1996: 91, and drawing on the dialogism of Mikhail Bahktin) that gives full, heterogeneous voice to all those Others. The model presented here goes further than the textual, however, finding heterogeneity, experimentation and transformation in the principles of organisation, production and social relations within and across these media by considering the means of communication as socially and materially produced (Williams, 1980). This approaches Raymond Williams's earlier notion of democratic communication, the origins of which are:

> genuinely multiple ... [where] all the sources have access to the common channels ... [and where those involved are able] to communicate, to achieve ... [a]ctive reception and living response.
>
> (Williams, 1963: 304)

In his study of zines in the US, Duncombe (1997: 15) talks of his attempts to 'discipline undisciplined subjects.' How well a single theoretical model may 'contain' such diversity will be one of its tests, along with an examination of its explanatory power. I will draw principally on the theoretical 'sketches' presented by three key studies: the politically radical media of the US and Europe in the 1970s and early 1980s (Downing, 1984), a study of British 'cultural alternatives' (Dickinson,

1997) and Duncombe's (1997) study of American zines. I will also attempt to find purchase from aspects of cultural theory (Bourdieu, 1984, 1993 and 1997).

Defining 'alternative' and 'radical'

The apparent looseness in defining terms in this field has led some critics to argue that there can be no meaningful definition of the term 'alternative media' (Abel, 1997). 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' offers a much looser purchase. Custom and practice within alternative media of the past decade appears to have settled on 'alternative' as the preferred term. As a blanket term its strength lies in that it can encompass far more than radical, or 'social change publishing' can; it can also include alternative lifestyle magazines, an extremely diverse range of zine publishing and the small presses of poetry and fiction publishers. To deploy 'alternative' as an analytical term, however, might afford us little more specificity than saying 'non-mainstream.' Some commentators appear to confuse the two terms.

I think it valuable to look in some detail at the competing definitions of the alternative media. In what follows I shall argue that the most conspicuous arguments put forward by both proponents and antagonists of the alternative media are inadequate, since neither offer a sophisticated understanding of the phenomena. In their place I propose a model of the alternative media that is as much concerned with how it is organised within its sociocultural context as with its subject matter. I shall begin though, with that subject matter.

There is no shortage of studies to show how the mass media characterises and represents specific social groups in ways that suggest those groups to be blameworthy for particular economic or social conditions, or to hold extreme political or cultural views. Such groups rarely comprise the powerful and influential elites that routinely have access to such media. By contrast, other groups are marginalised and disempowered by their treatment in the mass media, treatment against which they generally have no redress. The Glasgow University Media Group (1976 and 1982, for example) have shown how trades unions, striking workers and the depiction of industrial relations are portrayed largely from the position of the powerful: the

politicians, the company owners and their managers; workers and their representatives, on the other hand, are portrayed at best as irritants, at worst as saboteurs operating outside the bounds of logic and common sense. David Miller's (1994) study of the mainland reporting of Northern Ireland, Todd Gitlin's (1980) examination of the American media's characterising of the American New Left in the 1960s and Marguerite J. Moritz's (1992) study of the American media's representation of gays and lesbians all point to extremely selective and prejudiced news reporting. I am less interested here in exploring the reasons for the social construction of mass media news (based on the complex of newsroom routines and rituals, conditions of production, notions of professionalism and objectivity, rehearsed standards of writing and editing, as well as accident and opportunity), rather I wish to emphasise the alternative press's responses to such construction as demonstrated not simply by critiques of those media but by constructing their own news, based on alternative values and frameworks of news-gathering and access. In short, these values proceed from a wish to present other interpretations of stories - and to present stories not normally considered as news - which challenge the prevailing 'hierarchy of access' (Glasgow University Media Group, 1976: 245) normally found in the media. An élite of experts and pundits tends to have easier and more substantial access to a platform for their ideas than do dissidents, protesters, minority groups and even 'ordinary people': 'powerful groups and individuals have privileged and routine entry into the news itself and to the manner and the means of its production' (Glasgow University Media Group, 1980: 114). The aim of that part of the alternative media interested in news remains simple: to provide access to the media for these groups on those groups' terms. This means developing media to encourage and normalise such access, where working people, sexual minorities, trades unions, protest groups - people of low status in terms of their relationship to elite groups of owners, managers and senior professionals - could make their own news, whether by appearing in it as significant actors or by creating news that was relevant to their situation.

John Fiske (1992d) has pointed out differences between the mainstream media and the alternative media in their selection of news and in the way that selection is made, particularly how the alternative media politicise the 'repression of events' (though Fiske is severely sceptical of the relevance of the alternative press to the quotidian concerns of ordinary people). This remains a continuing, defining characteristic of

how much alternative media view their approach to their content. The US pressure group Project Censored publishes an annual publication that contains the US's 'top censored stories.' Of the 25 stories presented as 'the news that didn't make the news' in its 1999 volume, only 4 had been covered by the American mainstream media. Since its founding in 1976, Project Censored has consistently proved the assumption that the alternative media is the home to stories that, for whatever reasons (government advice, commercial pressure from advertisers or cross-media ownership, an innate conservatism in news reporting, news priorities) do not appear in the mainstream media. Whilst no such project exists in the UK, it is possible to find similar examples here too. *Lobster*, the British journal of parapolitics, was the first to break the story about Colin Wallace and "Operation Clockwork Orange", the MI5 plot to destabilise the Wilson Government. Well before *The Sunday Times* and *Nature* locked horns over the topic, the occasional alternative investigative magazine *Open Eye* published an annotated feature on Peter Duesberg and the AIDS/HIV controversy, which also included notes on where to find more on "unconventional viewpoints" regarding AIDS. News on some British topics is only to be found abroad: the US journal *CovertAction Quarterly* has published an extensive feature on British military tactics to target Republican teenagers in Northern Ireland for harassment and even death.   In a media culture that appears less and less interested in in-depth investigative reporting, alternative media appear to provide information about and interpretations of the world which we might not otherwise see and information about the world that we simply will not find anywhere else. Alternative publications are at bottom more interested in the free flow of ideas than in profit.

Two American studies demonstrate the significance of alternative media as for radical or unconventional content. Patricia Glass Schuman (1982) argues that 'the alternative press - in whatever format - is our modern pamphleteer' (p. 3). The alternative media employ methods of production and distribution, allied to an activist philosophy of creating 'information for action' timeously and rapidly. As such, they are able to deal emerging issues. It is in the nature of such media to have these emerging issues at their very heart, since it is in the nature of activism to respond to social issues as they emerge. Schuman shows how rape as a social issue was first constructed as a 'sex crime' by an alternative press publication - a full year before the *New York Times* identified it as such, and four years before a major book publisher tackled the subject.

In the second essay, Terri A. Kettering (1982) examines the issue of rape in more detail, comparing its coverage in the US alternative media and in mainstream publications, along with a similar study of the Iranian revolution of 1970s. In both cases she presents compelling evidence to confirm her thesis that '[I]n both timeliness and content, the alternative press can be shown to be a more dependable information resource' (p. 7). Subsequently my own work (for example, Atton, 1996a, Ch. 3) has presented further confirmation from a British perspective.

Such arguments bear out the second and third elements of a definition of the alternative press proposed by the Royal Commission on the Press (1977):

1. An alternative publication deals with the opinions of small minorities;

2. it expresses attitudes 'hostile to widely-held beliefs';

3. it 'espouses views or deals with subjects not given regular coverage by publications generally available at newsagents'.

The Commission went on to emphasise the potential value of '[a] multiplicity of alternative publications [that] suggest satisfaction with an insufficiently diverse established media, and an unwillingness or inability on the part of major publications to provide space for the opinions of small minorities' (1977: 40). It also recognised the marginality of many of the presses, their small print runs and virtual invisibility in the marketplace.

For the most part this assessment rings true. However, the first element of the Commission's definition is contentious: the size of minority audiences is debatable (the alternative media has published and continues to publish for some large minorities: the gay and lesbian media is one such). In the light of mass protest movements, it is arguable whether such views as are propounded in the alternative media are not in fact 'widely-held.' Similarly, John Fiske's (1992a) assertion that much of the alternative media 'circulates among a fraction of the same educated middle classes as does official news' is also contentious (p. 47). In the light of the accounts of contemporary alternative news production (for example, Dickinson, 1997;

Minority Press Group, 1980a; Whitaker, 1981), his further assertion that this represents 'a struggle between more central and more marginalised allegiances within the power-bloc, rather than between the power-bloc and the people' is less credible. Indeed, this would be flatly contradicted by those whose aim in setting up an alternative news publication was in order to regain some power over their lives, since they consider themselves emphatically not of the power-bloc.

The editors of *Alternatives in Print* (the major current bibliographical reference work in this field) present three apparently simple criteria against which to test the publishers that appear in their pages. They hold that a publisher might be thought of as alternative if it meets at least one of the following:

1. the publisher has to be non-commercial, demonstrating that 'a basic concern for ideas, not the concern for profit, is the motivation for publication';

2. the subject matter of their publications should focus on 'social responsibility or creative expression, or usually a combination of both';

3. finally, it is enough for publishers to define themselves as alternative publishers.

(*Alternatives in Print*, 1980: vii)

Such apparently simple criteria present problems. Whilst non-commerciality is rare enough in mainstream publishing, no indication is given as to how a concern for ideas might be demonstrated. Non-profit making publishers can easily include charities, some of whose aims might well conflict with what our authors have in mind in their second criterion. Whilst they do not provide examples of 'social responsibility' the authors are writing from a perspective where we would expect three issues to be prominent: the promotion of sustainable economics, of local communities and of local democracy, all in the face of an increasing globalisation and concentration of commercial and political power into a nexus of national government and corporate interests. Unfortunately, the addition in this second criterion of '[c]reative expression, or usually a combination of both' first of all widens the definition of an alternative

media to include any type of artistic publication, then apparently narrows it to a category that is, in my experience, hardly encountered at all in this field: the combination of creative expression and social responsibility. In my survey of British and American alternative presses, I was able to identify many examples of these two categories as separate, but none that combined them. Though the diversity of features that typify the zine might well include both in one cover, that is not to say that there is any articulation between them (Atton, 1996a). The third criterion, that it is 'enough for publishers to define themselves as alternative publishers' hardly needs comment. Since the rise of the zine in the 1980s, many mainstream publishers (mostly newspapers) have tried to capitalise on its attraction to a young readership largely disaffected with the mainstream media by issuing their own ersatz zines. This last criterion makes no allowance for such deceit.

Finally, these three criteria - and we must bear in mind that they are meant to be separate criteria, for which a publication need only fulfil any one to be considered 'alternative' - ultimately lead us nowhere more precise than does the more common negative definition best summarised by Comedia: 'it is not the established order; it is not the capitalist system; it is not the mainstream view of a subject ...; or it is simply not the conventional way of doing something' (Comedia, 1984: 95).

Such vagueness of nature and intent leaves proponents of the alternative media and the presses themselves open, on occasion, to fierce criticism that questions their very existence. If they are not even able to define what they do, why should they be considered as the special cases they so clearly see themselves as? Richard Abel has argued that, with such vague aims as these, 'what we are left with is a term so elastic as to be devoid of virtually any signification' (Abel, 1997: 79). He claims that the alternative media fails to offer any convincing display of uniqueness in any of three areas: on the grounds of content, on the championing of social change and on the grounds of economic freedom. A constructive definition of alternative media can begin with the presence of radical content, most often allied to the promotion of social change. Some would argue that the availability of Noam Chomsky's political writings at any branch of Waterstone's (when they were once the mainstay of the small press and the anarchist journal) proves that we simply do not need alternative media for the transmission of radical ideas. However, there remains much

opportunity for radical content outwith the mainstream: the British and American mass media are supremely disinterested in the radical politics of anarchism (in all its hues). Witness the demonisation of the term 'anarchist' in mainstream media coverage of the May Day 2000 protests in London or in the coverage the previous year's protests in Seattle against the World Trade Organisation. The equation of anarchism with thuggery (at worst with terrorism) is perennial (Atton, 1996b). By contrast the mass of anarchist journals, magazines, newsletters and web sites offer accounts of working-class resistance and struggles against global capitalism that, whilst highly-personalised and explicitly biased, present stories from under the police baton. The electronic archive Spunk Press (Atton, 1996b) offers a rare blend of populist rhetoric, activist information and intellectual substance. We may choose not to subscribe to their views, yet their are available in such 'alternative' publications in the absence of case-making elsewhere. And is not the content of most football fanzines radical to some degree? They are certainly oppositional in large part. At their heart is a critique of corporatism as thoroughgoing as any we might find in an anarchist magazine. An editorial in *Not The View*, the Celtic supporters's fanzine, demonstrates this well enough: 'The problem with having the club run by financial investors is that when they look at Celtic they only see a bunch of assets which make money. … When we as fans see Celtic, however, we see something unique and magical.' However idealised the latter statement might be (and however contentious it might be to, say, a Rangers supporter), to redress the former would require a radical programme of social change. *Not The View* may not be setting out a five-year plan, but it is certainly critiquing the causes of the malaise. It is no surprise that the roots of many football fanzines have been seen to lie in the punk fanzine and have exhibited a similar oppositional stance. Some editors of punk fanzines went on to edit football fanzines. This argument sees homologies between two groups of fanzines based on their identity as sites of cultural contestation. *Not The View* demonstrates well enough how popular culture can be politicised to social advantage. It is perhaps not too fanciful to see in the football fanzine a way to creating the kind of counter-hegemonic power bloc of which Stuart Hall has talked.

Tim O'Sullivan (1994) introduces the notion of 'radical' social change as a primary aim of 'alternative' media, in that they 'avowedly reject or challenge established and institutionalised politics, in the sense that they all advocate change in society, or at

least a critical reassessment of traditional values.' Elsewhere, in defining independent production (which itself can be construed as a part of alternative media) he notes a further two characteristics that set alternative media practice apart from the mainstream:

1. a democratic/collectivist process of production; and

2. a commitment to innovation or experimentation in form and/or content

(O'Sullivan, Dutton and Rayner, 1994: 205)

For O'Sullivan, alternative media argue for social change, seek to involve people (citizens, not élites) in their processes and are committed to innovation in form and content. This set of aims takes into account not only content, but presentation and organisational procedures. It defines alternative media positively and usefully. With these considerations in mind, we can consider Michael Traber's notion of alternative media where:

> the aim is to change towards a more equitable social, cultural and economic whole *in which the individual is not reduced to an object* (*of the media* or the political powers) but is able to find fulfilment as a total human being.

Traber, 1985: 3 (emphases added)

Traber argues that the conventions of the mass media marginalise the role of the 'simple man and woman', foregrounding instead the rich, the powerful and the glamorous. The former are only regarded as observers or marginal commentators on events (such as in the 'vox pop' interview); they only achieve prominence when they are the actors in a situation that is bounded by values based on, for instance, conflict or the bizarre. He divides alternative media into two sectors: advocacy media and grassroots media.[1] The alternative advocacy media adopt very different news values from the mass media, 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.

<div align="right">(Traber, 1985: 2)</div>

It is the grassroots media, Traber argues, that offer the most thoroughgoing version of alternative news values. They are produced by the same people whose concerns they represent, from a position of engagement and direct participation. This need not preclude the involvement of professionals, but they will be firmly in the role of advisors; their presence being to enable the 'ordinary people' to produce their own work, independent of professional journalists and editors. Traber is arguing from his experience as a journalist and journalism tutor in India, Zambia and Zimbabwe. His primary concerns are in the production of news and information in areas of these countries where the mass media (if there is any) does not penetrate, but also to provide a counter to the often state-run media or very limited channels for the dissemination of news. This counter, Traber argues, is best provided by local people, often working with a small number of professional journalists. These are not there to set agendas or even to insist on specific working practices, rather they are there to assist local people in developing their own networks of news-gathering, offer support and instill confidence in them as reporters, writers and editors. Traber is arguing that when media production is placed in the hands of ordinary people the types of news and the style in which it is presented will be more relevant, more 'useful' and more appropriate to the communities in which it is produced and distributed. Traber presents a set of alternative news values that are bound up not just in terms of what is considered as news, but also in approaches to news-gathering and in who writes such news and how such news is presented.

This model can be seen as a form of community media. Similar concerns were at the heart of the alternative community newspapers that sprung up in the early 1970s throughout Britain. Community media have at their heart the concepts of access and participation:

a conviction that the means of communication and expression should be placed in the hands of those people who clearly need to exercise greater control over

their immediate environment. [...] Once this happens, a process of internal dialogue in the community can take place, providing opportunities for developing alternative strategies.

<div align="right">(Nigg and Wade, 1980:7)</div>

A leaflet distributed to publicise the launch of the *Liverpool Free Press* in 1971 proclaimed its difference from mainstream newspapers thus:

> it's not part of a big newspaper chain and it's not trying to make money. The Free Press believes that as long as newspapers are run by businessmen for profit, there will be news that is not reported. The Free Press aims to report this news. In addition, it tries to provide information which community groups, factory workers, tenants and others will not only find interesting - but useful. The Free Press does not represent the views of any political party or organisation. The paper has no editor or owner - it is controlled by the people who work for it (a group of unpaid volunteers). The Free Press really is a different kind of newspaper...

<div align="right">Whitaker (1981, p. 103)</div>

This was certainly a different approach from that taken by the mass media, but it was also one in a long historical line of newspapers that sought to be free from commercial considerations and to provide 'ordinary people' with news and information that was directly useful to them in their daily lives. The publicity material for *The Liverpool Free Press* identified three prime elements that it shared with many alternative media ventures: commercial independence (anti-commerciality, even) and the journalistic freedom that was felt to bring; editorial independence from political parties and other organisations; and the empowerment of specific communities of interest (which in the case of the Liverpool Free Press and many other similar papers is also a local community).

As an unnamed participant in a seminar led by Noam Chomsky had it: 'by alternative I'm referring to media that are or could be citizen-controlled as opposed to state- or corporate-controlled' (quoted in Achbar, 1994: 197). By such control not only

freedom from corporate influence may be obtained, but also the freedom to publish on subjects directly *useful* to citizens and to involve those same citizens in their production. Whilst the content of such media is clearly important, my concern here is to examine theories of alternative media that privilege the processes by which people are empowered through their direct involvement in alternative media production. Stephen Duncombe (1997) has argued that 'the culture of consumption can neutralise all dissenting voices' by assimilating their content' (p. 127). In other words, it is not the simple content of a text that is evidence of its radical nature; Duncombe is arguing what many alternative publishers would also argue: that it is rather the *position* of the work with respect to the relations of production that gives it its power and enables it to avoid recuperation by the mere duplication of its ideas. This is not to deny the significance of content, rather it is to present it within a productive context that can be the radical equal of content in the pursuit of social change. Here I follow Duncombe in his argument that:

> the medium of zines is not just a message to be received, but a model of
> participatory cultural production and organisation to be acted upon.
>
> (Duncombe, 1997: 129)

In arguing for social change alternative media may then be understood not only as producing instrumental discourses/of instrumentality (theoretical, expository, organisational) to provoke change. Following Duncombe, they are able to enact social change through their own means of production, which are themselves positioned in relation to the dominant means of production. Position and attitude both may argue for social change at a number of levels. The change (that is) looked for need not be structural on a national or supra-national level; it may be local, even individual: for Duncombe even the personal act of becoming a zine editor is a social transformation, regardless of how few copies of the zine are sold (or even made). If the personal may be political, so the personal may be of social consequence.

At this stage it is useful to develop a set of characteristics that proceed from the above definitions and place these at the heart of a theoretical framework, rather than place definitional competition there. Definitions, in any case, have historical and cultural contingencies. 'Alternative' in West Coast counter-cultural terms invokes 'alternative

therapies' and 'New Age' thinking. 'Radical' for some can be as much to do with avant-garde artistic activity as with politics. For zine writers, neither term might be preferable: the even looser 'DIY publishing' might replace both. Does 'radical' always entail 'opposition'? Downing talks of 'radical media' (1984), an 'alternative public realm (1988), 'alternative media' (1995) and 'radical alternative media' (2001), but he also refers to 'counter-information' and 'popular oppositional culture'. His discussion of Negt and Kluge's (1972/1983) work raises Gramsci's notion of 'counter-hegemony' which, Downing implies, is also a driving-force behind the contemporary media he is examining. We might consider the entire range of alternative and radical media as representing challenges to hegemony, whether on an explicitly political platform, or employing the kinds of indirect challenges through experimentation and transformation of existing roles, routines, emblems and signs that Hebdige (1979) locates at the heart of counter-hegemonic subcultural style. Jakubowicz (1991) finds in 'alternative' a wider meaning: not simply sects or narrow special interests, but a wide-ranging and influential sphere that may include all manner of reformist groups and institutions. Yet its influence is significantly mitigated by state censorship (since its publications are very visible) and by its own policy (being interested in long-term survival) from advocating widespread social change. This last is reserved for an 'oppositional', revolutionary public sphere.

From a sociological point of view, there is a discrepancy between what 'alternative' signifies and what 'oppositional' (and what we might consider its cognates: 'counter-information', 'oppositional' and 'counter-hegemony') signifies. It is instructive here to refer to how Raymond Williams interpreted them:

> Williams made a vital distinction between alternative and oppositional practices. Alternative culture seeks a place to coexist within the existing hegemony, whereas oppositional culture aims to replace it. For instance, there is a world of difference between a minority 'back-to-nature' cult and the ecology movement's global reach.

> (McGuigan, 1992: 25)

Culturally and politically, then, such media as defined by Downing as 'alternative' and by Jakubowicz as 'oppositional' are perhaps best considered as oppositional in intent, having social change at their heart. This accords with Williams's hope that the culture of the new social movements, whilst being termed an 'alternative' culture, was 'at its best ... always an oppositional culture' (Williams, 1983: 250). In his study of radical media in the US and mainland Europe, Downing (1984) offers one of the few detailed essays into a theory of the media of these oppositional cultures.

Downing's theory of radical media

Downing proposes a set of 'alternatives in principle' that draw on anarchist philosophy, though they do not presuppose any explicit anarchist tendency within any particular publication (indeed, none of Downing's case studies are of anarchist publications; most might be broadly characterised as radical socialist). Instead, he presents these principles in contrast to 'transmission belt socialism' that he argues, rather than liberating media, constrains it by demanding unquestioning allegiance to the Party, its intelligentsia and the institutions of the State. Revolutionary socialist media, Downing holds, whatever their totalizing claims against the monopolies of the capitalist mass media, are hardly exemplars of media democracy in action: they are as hierarchical, limiting and bound by authority as are the mass media of capitalism. Whilst interested primarily in political media, he is not prescriptive about content: rather he privileges process over product, organisation and engagement over words on the page and circulation figures. He argues:

1. the importance of encouraging contributions from as many interested parties as possible, in order to emphasise the 'multiple realities' of social life (oppression, political cultures, economic situations);

2. that radical media, while they may be partisan, should never become a tool of a party or intelligentsia;

3. that radical media at their most creative and socially significant privilege movements over institutions;

4. that within the organisation of radical media there appears an emphasis on prefigurative politics.

(Downing, 1984: 17)

Downing was writing before the radical transformation of the communist countries after 1989 and his arguments against the Party and the State are less urgent today. Neither does Downing offer an historical perspective that stretches back further than the 1960s: the anarchist presses of the US and Europe and the varieties of radical (and Radical) newspapers before them remain untouched: their 'alternatives in principle' are unconsidered. Downing also ignores zine culture and the Party newspaper. In his extensively revised edition of this work, Downing (2001) ranges much more widely through history and culture, drawing richly for example on 18th and 19th century political cartooning in Britain, German labour songs of the 19th and early 20th centuries, and 19th century African American public festivals. There is not space here to engage in all these manifestations of radical media that take us well beyond the print and radio media which were Downing's earlier concerns. It is worth, however, examining Downing's updated theoretical perspectives as they proceed and inform his historical instances. Downing stresses features of his earlier model, particularly the emphasis on multiple realities of oppression (once more he draw on anarchist philosophy, an approach I also find particularly valuable); organisational models that suggest prefigurative politic; and the privileging of movements over institutions. This last informs his entire approach to the extent that he considers radical media as the media of social movements. As in his 1984 work, this means that single-person or small-group ventures such as fanzines and zines are ignored, as are what some (Downing amongst them?) might term 'weaker' forms of alternative media such as the personal web page (I consider all these forms to be significant manifestations of alternative media). His approach is reflected in his choice of terminology: he prefers 'radical alternative media' which, he argues, is a more precise term than 'alternative media' ('alternative media is almost oxymoronic. Everything is, at some point, is alternative to something else'; Downing, 2001: ix). For me his designation signals an interest in considering media as radical to the extent that they explicitly shape political consciousness through collective endeavour (after all, 'rebellious communication and social movements' is the subtitle of his revised work). As we have seen, Downing is now open to a far wider range of media than his 1984 edition suggests, yet his model

remains limited by his emphasis on social movements. His nuanced arguments draw on a richer, more subtly layered account of radical media than his earlier work. He brings together considerations of an alternative public sphere, counterhegemony and resistance, the place of the Gramscian organic intellectual in such media, the role and nature of audiences – all of which I also examine here for the same reason: to move away from the futile 'hunt for sole [social] agents' Downing, 2001: 98) and to place radical and alternative media as complex 'agents of developmental power, not simply as counterinformation institutions, and certainly not as a vapid cluster of passing gnats' (p. 45). Downing acknowledges that his earlier binarism (between radical and mainstream media) and 'antibinarism' (seeing in radical media a way forward beyond the then dominant opposition between western capitalist media and the Soviet model) prevented him from seeing more finely gradated positions, such as the possibility of democratising mass media or the occasional, radical deployment of mass media. Yet I feel his striving for a more 'impure', hybridised version of radical media is left unfulfilled by his focus on social movements. Hybridity and purity as problematics of alternative media are certainly accessible through an examination of new social movement media, but they can also be approached through media that accommodate themselves rather more cosily with the mass media and mass consumption (as in my examination of Jody LaFerriere's personal web site, *The Big DumpTruck!*, Atton, 2001), where a celebration of the banal and the mundane replace political consciouness-raising. The limits of Downing's approach also extend to his coverage of artistic production as an instance of radical alternative media: he is considers street theatre and performance art only as media practices of social movements. This leaves no space for the performance art of, say, the Vienna actionists (Green, 1999), or the 'demotic avant-garde' that characterises the work of British artist Stewart Home (as presented for example in Home, 1995). (Though Downing does make an important point when he reminds us that by considering art, media and communication together we 'do not fall into the trap of segregating information, reasoning and cognition from feeling, imagination, and fantasy'; p. 52.)

There are resonances with Downing's principles of 'rebellious communication' in the Radical reformist papers that flourished in England from the late eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries. Amongst these are we find a redrawing of technical and professional roles and responsibilities, and social and cultural transformations, such

as: 1) clandestine, underground distribution networks; 2) 'pauper management'; 3) journalists seeing themselves 'as activists rather than as professionals;' 4) an interest in 'expos[ing] 'the dynamics of power and inequality rather than report[ing] "hard news"' (Curran and Seaton, 1997: 15); 5) developing close relationship with readers - to the extent where many papers were supplied with reports written by readers (such as those by 'worker correspondents' - *Workers' Life*, 1928/1983 and 'reader-writers'- Atton, 1999a); 6) close links with radical organisations, highlighting the value of 'combination' and organised action; and 7) the key role of radical media in a working-class public sphere (Eley, 1992). At this time 'the militant press sustained a radical sub-culture' (Curran and Seaton, 1997: 20). Similar parallels may be found in the anarchist presses of the turn of the century (Hopkin, 1978 and Quail, 1978) and of the 1990s (Atton, 1999a), where they also resonate with a larger, non-aligned network of social movement publications centred on radical environmentalism (Carey, 1998 and Searle, 1997). This is not to ignore the historical and cultural contingencies of these practices, nor to deny homogenise their political content or their aims. Alternative media - like any forms of cultural production - and their creators are positioned, 'enunciated': 'we all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific' (Hall, 1990: 222). Particular social relations, forms of technology and styles of discourse (for example) and their combination are likely to be particular (and particularly 'available' for transformation within alternative media) at particular places and times. Whilst the bracketing-off of processes (and even content) might afford us conceptual clarity, the better to look closely at we mean by 'alternative media', we must not forget to recouple them with history and culture when dealing empirically.

Downing's principles also have purchase in the products of 'zine culture' (Duncombe, 1997). This invites further theoretical consideration regarding the radicality of process over that of content, a consideration that encourages us to account for alternative and radical media that comprise content that is not explicitly political or that has an avowedly non-political content, where the processes of production enable the 'position' of the media and its producers to be radicalised.

Beyond the political: attitude versus position in alternative and radical media

The separation of attitude and position in alternative and radical media has been explored by Stephen Duncombe in his work on American zines. For him, it is not the simple content of a text that is evidence of the radical nature of a zine. The content of many zines is hardly politically or socially transforming in itself. Their value proceeds not simply from their content … that is, not in the work's 'attitude toward the oppressive relations of production that mark our society, but [from] the work's position within these relations' (Duncombe, 1996: 315). Here Duncombe is drawing on Walter Benjamin's idea of 'The author as producer' (Benjamin,1934/1982) which Duncombe goes on to apply to the production of zines. He finds three characteristics that distinguish the production of zines from that of mainstream magazines, that exemplify their position within 'the oppressive relations of production' rather than simply their attitude towards them. First, zine producers are amateurs; second, their product is cheaply produced and promoted by multiple-copying at no profit; third, the distinction between producer and consumer is increasingly blurred.

In Benjamin's original text, however, his analysis goes further than Duncombe takes it. Benjamin argues that an author's works must have 'an organizing function, and in no way must their organizational usefulness be confined to their value as propaganda' (Benjamin, 1934/1982: 216). The development of the zine has encouraged many readers to produce their own publications. Zines developed as vehicles of personal expression; a network of zines arose where horizontal communication between zine editors and readers became perhaps as important as the production of the zine itself. The very format of the zine - with design and production values that owed more to the copy shop than the printing press - encouraged readers to become editors themselves. As Duncombe notes, 'emulation - turning your readers into writers - is elemental to the zine world' (p. 123). He draws on Benjamin for support: culture 'is better the more consumers it is able to turn into producers - that is, readers or spectators into collaborators' (quoted in Duncombe, 1997: 127). Once again, we can find resonances beyond the immediate genre. An extreme example of this may be found not in the zines of the 1980s (which are Duncombe's focus) but from the counter-culture of the 1960s: an issue of New York underground paper *Other Scenes* once offered an entirely blank set of pages for readers as a do-it-yourself publishing project (Lewis, 1972).

Zine culture indicates how radicality can be further located within production values and cultural values. Hebdige extended Kristeva's understanding of 'radical' to account for the punk fanzine's interest in 'the destruction of existing codes and the formulation of new ones' (Kristeva through Hebdige, 1979, p. 119). Here is an artefact expressive of a subculture (some argue it is constitutive of a subculture: 'Zines are punk,' declared an anonymous editor of *Hippycore* - Rutherford, 1992, p. 3). The punk fanzine stands for much more than an aesthetic preference; the radical bricolage that characterises the visual language of punk fanzines (Triggs, 1995), its graphics and typography can be seen as 'homologous with punk's subterranean and anarchic style' (Hebdige, 1979, p. 112). Its use of the photocopier as a liberating agent for the tyro editor became central to the 'copy culture' that grew out of punk over the next two decades (*New Observations,* 1994).

Towards a model of alternative and radical media

Any model must consider alternative and radical media not simply in terms of the differences in content and medium/carrier (and its dissemination and delivery) but in relation to how communication as a social (rather than simply an informational) process is construed. The question: What is radical about radical media? then becomes two questions: What is radical about the ways in which the vehicle (the medium) is transformed and: What is radical about the communication processes (as instances of social relations) employed by that media? Dahlgren (1997) has observed that the focus of media research continues to move away from the 'classics steps of the communication chain,' that is: 1) the sender and the circumstances of production; 2) the form and content of the message; 3) the processes and impact of reception and consumption. This is in significant part due to the 'awkward fit' of such steps to questions surrounding the production of meaning by media audiences. A model of alternative and radical media must account not only for active audiences in the Fiskean sense of creating 'oppositional readings' of mainstream media products (Fiske, 1992a) but also for 'mobilized audiences' - as well as notions of horizontal linkage, reader-writers and extremely democratic organisational structures. Here the fit with dominant communication models becomes even more awkward.

A communications perspective on radical media is useful as long as we are able to keep in mind that its value will, as Dahlgren argues, be best realised from a cultural

interrogation. As a set of communication processes within (sub)cultural formations, radical media privilege the involved audience over the merely informed (Lievrouw, 1994); that audience partakes of the media from a social point of view, not merely as a 'public.' What we are calling 'alternative media' can be though of as being organised along similar lines to Benjamin's desideratum. They typically go beyond simply providing a platform for radical or alternative points of view: they emphasise the organisation of media to enable wider social participation in their creation, production and dissemination than is possible in the mass media. Raymond Williams (1980) highlighted three aspects of communication as foci for this re-alignment: 'skills, capitalization and controls' (p. 54). In an explicit echo of Williams, James Hamilton (2001) has argued that to distinguish alternative media from the mass media the former must be deprofessionalised, decapitalised and deinstitutionalised. In short, they 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 systems.

The model I propose here deals with similar concerns: where social relations stand to be transformed through radical communications processes at the same time as the media (the vehicles) themselves stand to be transformed (visually, aurally, distributively). In this model, roles and responsibilities are no longer discrete; there is much overlap and, with that overlap, the transformation of notions such as professionalism, competence and expertise. No existing communication model offers an easy fit with such transformations. Robert Darnton's (1990) reconfiguration of the communication chain as a circuit gets closer than does the classical communication chain to the features and relations that might illuminate the social processes at work in radical media production and reception. His model at least acknowledges technical and professional roles such as publishers, printers and distributors. Perhaps Darnton's circuit is over-utilitarian: its focus is on roles and responsibilities rather than on processes, its cultural and social contingencies and determinants given the status of mere influences. His model emphasises the dominant and discrete roles of, for example, writers, publishers, distributors and readers. In radical and alternative media these roles are often confused and conflated, at times to an extreme degree: in the case of a zine, the writer and publisher is typically the same person, as well as being its designer, printer and distributor. In the case of a collectively-organised

paper, all such duties might be undertaken at different times by every member of the collective. Darnton's roles provide a poor fit with the transformed roles and social relations (often experimental and shifting) that radical media invoke and promote (perhaps most remarkably in the re-appearance throughout history of the notion of the reader-writer).

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Table 1. A typology of alternative and radical media

1. Content (politically radical, socially/culturally radical); news values

2. Form - graphics, visual language; varieties of presentation and binding; aesthetics

3. Reprographic innovations/adaptations - use of mimeographs, IBM typesetting, offset litho, photocopiers

4. 'Distributive use' (Atton, 1999b) - alternatives sites for distribution, clandestine/invisible distribution networks, anti-copyright

5. Transformed social relations, roles and responsibilities - reader-writers, collective organisation, de-professionalisation of e.g., journalism, printing, publishing

6. Transformed communication processes - horizontal linkages, networks

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Table 1 presents a typology that draws on the preceding analysis of existing definitions and theory. In it, elements 1-3 indicate products and 4-6 processes. It is these six elements that form the basis of the model presented here. The broad division into products and processes does imply independence, however. The social processes will activate and inform the development of the products to the extent that each position in a communications circuit such as Darnton's will be amenable to radicalisation in terms of products and processes, resources and relations. Using the model it becomes possible to consider each point on such a circuit as a dimension of communication, of social process ('writing', 'printing', distributing', etc.). 'Positions' becomes too fixed a term for them, since there may be overlap between them; for example, between the roles of writer, editor, publisher and distributor of a zine. As dimensions, roles and responsibilities are able to comprise a constellation of activities and relationships. A radical publication might then be interrogated as to its radicality

in terms of its multi-dimensional character, a perspective that privileges the overlap and intersection between dimensions. Here are two examples.

First, a radical approach to distribution can entail making use of skills and sites belonging to groups and communities normally excluded from mainstream modes of distribution in an alternative public sphere (Downing, 1988), as well as making use of transformed notions of intellectual property (such as 'anti-copyright;' Atton, 1999b). These in turn suggest forms of reprography that facilitate further production by 'readers' (such as the *Open Pamphlet* series from the US, printed so as to open out to A4 to facilitate photocopying) who themselves become hybrid printers, finishers and distributors. Second, the position of a solitary agent who is writer, editor and printer need not be explained simply as the outcome of a dilettante interest in trying out new jobs or as a result of lack of resources (though it may be these as well), but from a perspective that transforms these positions in relation to established notions and standards of professionalism, competence and 'possibility' within those roles. At the same time the roles have the power to transform one another by their coming-together (whether by mutual abrasion or a more 'liquid' interpenetration). Each dimension need not be limited to activities and relationships through a radicalising of roles and responsibilities; it can also include the products of those activities and technological transformations that lead to those products (aesthetics, reprographic technologies, innovations in distribution). Dimensions that intersect can generate counter-hegemonic strategies of ownership (capital ownership and intellectual property), power relations within the media and its audience. Here we locate Downing's notions of lateral linkages and the empowerment of active audiences through those linkages (Downing, 1984 and 2001) and those relations which engage with prevalent forces, especially regarding the status of creators and producers in relation to equivalent roles in prevalent culture (the dominant public sphere versus the alternative public sphere).

Is it possible to make any comparative assessment of radicality across various instances of alternative and radical media? How do we construe a publication that tends to radicality in differing degrees in differing dimensions? What is our scale for measuring those degrees? For instance, a publication that is radical in respect of its organisation, but conservative in respect of those who write for it - one that employs only professional journalists yet in a collective decision-making organisation. Within

each dimension there is complexity: within a reprographic ('printing') dimension a radical use of reprographic technology (the photocopier by zine producers, for instance) may be present along with a new social relation (an amateur writer working also as a printer): this presents a transformed power relation to the prevailing professional culture of printing. We need also to be alert to historical or geographical contingency: the absence of radicality in any dimension may not limit a medium's revolutionary potential: the dimension may not be 'available' for radicalisation at that time or place, or in that culture. The authorship of content may be the subject of a dimension and, as we have seen, need not be concerned solely with political radicality, but equally or instead with cultural content. This encourages us to approach these media from the perspective of 'mixed radicalism', once again paying attention to hybridity rather than expecting a consistent adherence to a 'pure', fixed set of criteria: '[i]f … radical alternative media have one thing in common, it is that they break somebody's rules, although rarely all of them in every respect' (Downing, 2001: xi). Despite these difficulties, I hope that my model avoids homogenising alternative and radical media as the media of radical politics, of publications with minority audiences, of amateur writing and production. It suggests an area of cultural production that - whilst it lacks the explanatory power of a totalizing concept - enables us to consider its various manifestations and activations as part of an autonomous field (in the Bourdieusian sense) that is constituted by its own rules.

Alternative media as a field of production

How appropriate is it to consider alternative and radical media as a field? Bourdieu's (1993) field of cultural production does recognise a space for avant-garde artistic activities, which may comprise some aspects of alternative and radical media practice (independent record labels, mail art, artists' books). Fiske has suggested that the systems of production of distribution within fan culture comprise a 'shadow cultural economy' (Fiske, 1992b: 33). For all that it may admit, the cultural field is perhaps too limited: it is after all concerned with literary and artistic values of production. This is notwithstanding the ability of Bourdieu's field of cultural production to encompass 'extremes' of creative activity such as the various avant-gardes. For Bourdieu, though, these take place within the sector of the field concerned with

restricted production, to be distinguished from an opposing sector of large-scale production. One purpose in positing an entire 'oppositional field' - rather than attempt to accommodate contestation within any existing formulation is that Bourdieu's field seems inhospitable to particular notions of radicality. Within alternative media production there are numerous avant-gardes that confound the dichotomy of restricted/large-scale sectors. Mail art (Held, 1991) might be thought of as a democratised version of restricted artistic production, where elite art practices (such as the limited edition and invitations to group exhibitions) are opened up to as many as wish to contribute (*Global Mail* is a zine devoted to calls to such 'open' exhibitions). In this arena at least, the value of the limited edition work of art is highly eroded by its being opened up to producers/agents that are typically drawn from the public for large-scale cultural production. Restricted field practices are radically re-positioned by being transformed under demotic conditions more usually associated with large-scale production strategies and techniques. We might also consider even the radicalisation of plagiarism in such a 'demotic restricted field.' Bourdieu (1993: 128) finds plagiarism in large-scale production as an indicator of 'indifference or conservatism': in the hands of an avowedly working-class autodidact such as Stewart Home (a further example of the composite artist-author-editor-publisher) plagiarism is radicalised as a demotic avant-garde (for example, Home 1995). A demotic avant-garde appropriates and re-positions capital and authority directly from high culture, radically re-legitimising an artistic practice from that legitimate culture.

More recently, Bourdieu (1997) has proposed a journalistic field. It is difficult to see how alternative and radical media could fit into this formulation: as Marliere (1998) has shown, the field itself too undifferentiated, too monolithic 'to provide a realistic account of a plural and heterogeneous reality' (p. 223) of dominant journalistic practices, let alone alternatives to them. There may be some value in considering it as a field in its own right, as an oppositional counterpart to Bourdieu's dominant journalistic field. Again, though, the multi-dimensionality of the model suggests a conceptual space wider than journalism *tout court* - are zines journalism? What is the relationship of anarchist Web sites and Internet discussion lists to journalism? The range of media products and activities available to the present model encourages a hybridised field that comprises cultural (artistic, literary) practices and journalistic

practices and that admits of extremes of transformation in products, processes and relations between the two. I have proposed definitional and theoretical models that privilege the transformatory potential of the media as reflexive instruments of communication practices in social networks: there is a focus on process and relation. The model does at least encourage interrogation across the range of production in this field, the better to place its constellations of products, activities, institutions, movements, moments and cultures in structured, explanatory settings.

Note

1. Traber's terminology reflects his background in development and alternative journalism in the South; neither 'advocacy' nor 'grassroots' are terms much used in British media studies, for instance. This twin role of the alternative press has also been noted by such as Elizabeth Fox (1997) in her survey of media and culture in Latin America, where she highlights the organisational and educational value of such media. The term 'grassroots' is more commonly used to define such media as that described in Tomaselli and Louw's (1991) studies of the alternative media in South Africa. The use of these terms in the present study is simply to clarify two trends in alternative media, the better to analyse one; there is no intention to imply sociopolitical similarities between the conditions of production in the South and those in Britain.

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