Book review

Atton, C. (2002). *Alternative media*. Sage. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446220153

Reviewed by **Bart Cammaerts**, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, United Kingdom, E-mail: b.cammaerts@lse.ac.uk, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9508-5128

https://doi.org/10.1515/commun-2024-0143

How relevant is the concept of alternative media today?

In many ways, Atton's *Alternative Media* (2002) was a landmark book which at the time not only countered a lack of attention for alternative subaltern media but also made a productive contribution when it came to rethinking what constituted alternative media. In the years prior to its publication, the field of media and communication studies was arguably focusing overly on the structural/domination power of mainstream media, on journalism, on the political economy of media and communication infrastructures, and on the concentration of ownership in both media and communication sectors, and less so on the use of media and communication tools in the context of agency and the development and nurturing of counter-power and subaltern communities of resistance.

There were, of course, exceptions to this, such as Negt and Kluge's (1972) book on the proletarian public sphere in Europe, Nigg and Wade's (1980) study on community media in the United Kingdom, as well as Downing's (1984) research into radical media, which in conjunction also constituted a critique of Habermas' bourgeois public sphere (see also Fraser, 1992). It is not my intention here to summarize Atton's book nor to review it again, others have done this eloquently already (Meade, 2002; Stein, 2002), but rather to use the ideas that were central to the book as a springboard to interrogate and reflect on the salience of the concept of alternative media today.

The main contribution of Atton's book was to argue that the way alternative media had been conceptualized until then was too restrictive, thereby excluding and missing too many mediated expressions that were situated outside of the mainstream; think of DIY fanzines and later e-zines central to a plethora of subcultures or hybrid forms that were situated in the grey zone between alternative and mainstream, in-between civil society, the market, and the state (see also Bailey et al., 2007). In addition to that, Atton also demonstrated that the alternativeness of media can equally lie in alternative modes of production, organization, and distribution, or innovative media styles and genres. In doing so, he set the stage for the opening up of alternative media towards a much broader, encompassing, but also more

complex and multi-layered concept. However, as the late Dutch football player Johan Cruyff once proclaimed: Every advantage has its disadvantage. By expanding our understanding of alternative media, the concept also lost some of its explanatory power–which Atton (2002, p. 29) recognized–but what we gained in return was the ability to "consider its various manifestations and activations as part of an autonomous field (in the Bourdieusian sense) that is constituted by its own rules."

Fast forward 20 years and what constitutes alternative, mainstream, and radical is still–if not more–fractious and contentious today. The internet, as a material infrastructure, a communication platform, and a deluge of digital services, was somewhat in its early days when the book was published. Although many voices were critical of its emancipatory potential, which was also recognized in the book (Atton, 2002, p. 134), at the end of the 1990s optimism still very much trumped dystopia. Today, the evidence suggests that these pessimistic critiques were much more on the money (pun intended) than the techno-optimist vision ever was. It suffices to refer to the emergence of social media, the datafication and commodification of sociality, the introduction of AI, as well as the hyper-marketisation of the internet to run that point home.

The ramifications of this for the concept of alternative media are profound and disruptive. Do social media platforms, for instance, constitute alternative channels of distribution for alternative voices and content, or are they quintessentially mainstream platforms, or both? Are activists that increasingly use AI to produce resistant discourses or protest images for their respective struggles turning these tools into a new form of alternative media? Or, indeed, has the relational dichotomy between alternative and mainstream become too blurry to be of any analytical use today? As Atton (2002, p. 150) asked back then: Does it even "make sense to talk of alternative media in cyberspace?"

By referring to a Bourdieusian autonomous *field* and to Melucci's (1995) idea of a *free space* in the conclusion, Atton (2002, p. 156) very much highlighted the importance of "autonomy" (from state and market) for alternative media, opening up possibilities for experimentation and innovation. To be clear, full autonomy has always been a challenge and maybe even a fallacy, also in the context of print cultures and certainly broadcasting, but at the very least independence was somewhat possible; think of photocopy machines or pirate radio. However, the question we are faced with today is whether it is even possible to think of the internet as a free space in the way Melucci understood it? As Julian Assange and WikiLeaks (as well as many other activists and movements) have found out in recent times, the internet can also turn into a very illiberal repressive space for those who transgress "too much," according to the corporate and political powers that be (Cammaerts, 2013). In such cases, the capitalist structures of the internet, which control hosting, domain names, financial services, and platforms, suddenly become highly visible,

as terms and conditions are invoked to close down accounts, (shadow)ban users, impede access, and/or remove content.

Finally, what is and constitutes "radical" is also increasingly topsy-turvy. Think of extremely rich neo-fascist populists positioning themselves as "anti-establishment," as "the resistance" against so-called woke overreach, or as advocating for "radical" reactionary change. In line with this, it is arguably the "radical" right that has been most successful in recent decades in applying Gramsci and turning their racist and fascist counter-hegemonic discourses hegemonic (Cammaerts, 2022). Keeping this in mind, we thus need to carefully consider what type of communities use alternative media or alternative channels of communication, and for what purpose. In this regard, the distinction that Couldry (2002; emphasis in original) made between communities *without* and "communities *with* closure" is still useful today. Whereas the former use alternative media to deepen democracy and expand rights, the latter not only undermine democratic culture but also seek to deny and take away rights from certain "others."

What all this calls for is the need to be much more precise and clear about what alternative and radical actually means and refers to, and ask ourselves the questions: alternative to what?; and radical to achieve which aims and goals for whom?

References

Atton, C. (2002). *Alternative media*. Sage. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446220153

Bailey, O., Cammaerts, B., & Carpentier, N. (2007). *Understanding alternative media*. Open University Press.

Cammaerts, B. (2013). Networked resistance: The case of WikiLeaks. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 18*(4), 420–436. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12024

Cammaerts, B. (2022). The abnormalisation of social justice: The 'Anti-Woke Culture War' discourse in the UK. *Discourse & Society, 33*(6), 730–743. ://doi.org/10.1177/09579265221095407

Couldry, N. (2002). *Alternative media and mediated community*. Paper presented at the 23rd conference of the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR), Barcelona, 21–27 July.

Downing, J. (1984). *Radical media: The political experience of alternative communication*. South End Press.

Fraser, N. (1992). Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy (pp. 109–142). In C. Calhoun (Ed.), *Habermas and the public sphere*. MIT Press.

Meade, R. R. (2002). Book review: Alternative media. *Media, Culture & Society, 24*(5), 727–728. https://doi.org/10.1177/016344370202400513

Melucci, A. (1995). The new social movements revisited: Reflections on a sociological misunderstanding (pp. 107–119). In L. Maheu (Ed.), *Social movements and social classes: The future of collective action*. Sage.

Negt, O., & Kluge, A. (1972). *Public sphere and experience: Towards an analysis of the bourgeois and proletarian public sphere*. University of Minnesota Press.

Nigg, H., & Wade, G. (1980). *Community media: Community communication in the United Kingdom: Video, local T.V., film, and photography*. Regenbogen.

Stein, L. (2002). Book review: Alternative media. *Communications, 27*(3), 401–403.