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Overcoming net-centricity in the study of alternative and community media

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Overcoming net-centricity in the study of alternative and community media

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It is timely to start a journal that focuses on alternative and community media as distinct phenomena to research and theorise. Over the last two decades, the study of alternative – that is, non-mainstream – media and bottom-up, community, participatory or movement media has increased steadily and matured into a strong, highly relevant and very important sub-field within media and communication studies, but also within social movement studies. Debates have ranged from discussions regarding definitional boundaries between alternative, community or other types of non-mainstream media to the counter-hegemonic nature, or lack thereof, of the content produced by these media and the emancipatory roles these media can potentially play in democratic as well as non-democratic or democratising societies (see, among others, Atton, 2002; Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpentier, 2008; Couldry and Curran, 2003; Downing et al., 2001; Howley, 2005).

The academic attention and the legitimisation it has provided have arguably also contributed (in part) to the increased recognition of the emancipatory and democratic role of alternative and community media by policy-makers at national as well as international levels of governance. Regarding the latter, we can refer to the final Geneva Declaration of the United Nations-sponsored World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), calling upon all relevant actors to provide active 'support to media based in local communities' (WSIS, 2003: Article 23j). In the European Union, the European Parliament approved a report acknowledging the democratic and inclusive role of community media, recommending that Member States grant 'legal recognition to community media as a distinct group alongside commercial and public media where such recognition is still lacking' (European Parliament, 2008: 7).

In other words, much has been achieved in recent times. In addition to this, the emergence of the internet has had a positive impact on the possibilities for individuals and collectives to set up, operate and develop new forms of alternative and community media. Both the production and distribution costs have been reduced considerably, time and space constraints can potentially be overcome, there is a much easier and more direct access to audiences worldwide, and it is also more difficult for the state to fully control access to content stored on the network of networks. At the same time, new difficulties and issues have arisen: the internet is largely dominated by corporate actors and powerful economic interests; most online alternative media tend to cater to micro-audiences, and are situated at the tail end of the so-called long tail. Furthermore, government intervention to close down subversive content is still occurring through a variety of measures, as is the blanket surveillance of the online behaviour of all internet users by both state and corporate actors.

Because of the enormous opportunities afforded by the internet, but also because of the intricate and ever-evolving constraints inherent to the internet, the sub-field of alternative and community media has, in my view, been over-emphasising the role and importance of the internet to

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the detriment of other media formats that remain highly relevant in the contemporary communication-saturated and polymedia environment in which we live. I could refer here to the remaining importance of print cultures – whether through text, flyers, pamphlets or the visual imagery present in street art, posters, stickers and buttons. Likewise, audio, radio and film still play very important roles as alternative media in their own right. I would thus like to advocate for more research that focuses on the remaining importance of non-internet-mediated media for the production and distribution of alternative – counter-hegemonic – content.

I would also like to argue for the urgent need to differentiate in much clearer terms between 'alternative' channels of distribution, alternative content and alternative forms of organisation. Let us address each in turn. For many people and groups, the internet, and more specifically blogs and social media, increasingly constitute an alternative channel of distribution, instrumental in their efforts to bypass the oligopolistic grip of the mainstream media on the public space. However, the internet as an 'alternative' communicative infrastructure is at the same time also an intrinsic part of the mainstream, or rather of the dominant interests ruling our capitalist societies. This nuance is crucial, and manifests itself most clearly when it concerns the use of so-called 'alternative' channels and infrastructures by anti-systemic actors such as WikiLeaks, Anonymous, or anti-austerity and environmental activists. In these cases, it appears that the internet as an 'alternative' channel of communication is neither open nor very democratic at all (Cammaerts, 2015a).

More attention to the nature of the content that is being produced and distributed by alternative media is, in my view, also of importance going forward. This refers not only to the dialectic between the invisibilised hegemony and the strategies of visibility enacted by the counter-hegemonies (see Cammaerts, 2015b), but also to the differences and nuances within what could be considered counter-hegemonic. This last point inevitably invokes a set of normative and ethical dimensions that differentiate between content that refers to or is part of democratic and emancipatory struggles on the one hand, and content that is anti-democratic or reactionary on the other, as well as how these play out differently through alternative media. For example, some community radio stations are quite mainstream in terms of the content they produce, mimicking professional standards set by commercial or pubic broadcasters, playing chart music and so on. Other community radio stations, however, precisely aim to be radically complementary to state and commercial broadcasters content-wise, and to provide a platform for protest movements and activists operating in a community. Community radio can, however, also be used as an instrument to promote hatred and ventilate racism, as is the case with several hate radio stations in the United States, or to incite violence and even genocide, as was the case with Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines in Rwanda (Kirschke, Carver and Coliver, 1996; O'Connor and Cutler, 2008).

The final point I wish to make here has to do with the tension between the individual and the collective, as well as the nature of the organisational cultures within collectives. The over-emphasis on the internet and the neoliberal culture it tends to promote have also led to a more pronounced focus on individuals as alternative 'produsers', as free labourers, as activists and advocates, with less attention being paid to the collective dimensions and internal structures. Ideal-type alternative and particularly community media distinguish themselves from commercial and public service media among others by a bottom-up and grassroots ethos, by horizontal and participatory structures and by their embeddedness in strong democratic cultures (to paraphrase Barber, 1984). Again, this is not always the case. Often discrepancies can be observed between a discourse of participation and the actual participatory practices or lack thereof – the case of WikiLeaks, mentioned earlier, is a good example of this (Domscheit-Berg, 2011).

The internet and what it affords are certainly important and highly relevant, expanding and enriching the sub-field of alternative and community media, but this should not lead to less attention being paid to non-internet-mediated communication media, a blurring of the distinction between alternative channels and alternative content or a bracketing off of the internal organisational structures and (un-)democratic cultures present within alternative and community media.

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