MEDIATION AND ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

OR, RELOCATING THE CENTRE OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

Alternative media should not be marginal, but central, to the developing agenda of media and communication studies, because they challenge the massive concentration of 'symbolic power' (Bourdieu) in mainstream media institutions and the resulting 'exclusion' of most people 'from the power of naming' (Melucci). Precisely because alternative media organisations, in relative terms, lack symbolic resources, their activities tend to be largely invisible, but that is no reason why, as 'weapons of the weak' (Scott), they should be ignored. With some exceptions, media studies has neglected alternative media for too long, and neglected also the inequalities of symbolic power in which media institutions themselves are involved. But now there is less excuse for that neglect. When the 'digital divide' and the atrophy of representative democracy are hotly debated not only by academics but also by policy makers, media studies should listen to those who are not prepared to accept their exclusion from the power of naming; they are citizens with something important to contribute to debates about democracy, and in paying more attention to them, media studies can make an important link between its own agenda and urgent agendas in political theory and democratic debate.

Introduction

Most accounts of media power forget what should be their starting-point. While the analysis of how specific ideologies are reproduced through the production and consumption of media texts is 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' – '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. The primary sense of media power is simply that concentration of symbolic power. Or, as the political theorist Alberto Melucci (1996: 179) has put it: 'the real domination is today the exclusion from the power of naming'.

It only seems strange that critical media analysis has neglected media power in this primary sense, until you remember that the effectiveness of media power <u>depends</u> 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 (cf Couldry, 2000: chapters 1-3). Media power is a central part of contemporary societies' 'habitus' (Bourdieu: 1977: 78), their 'history turned into nature'.

So it is easy to overlook, or dismiss, the significance of those who <u>refuse</u> 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 in particular to overlook the practices of 'alternative media' (Atton, forthcoming), 'radical media' (Downing, 1984, 2000) or 'citizens' media' (Rodriguez, 2001). But it is not excusable.

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 centralisation. This is not utopian in some hopelessly idealistic sense, but it _is_ utopian in the sense insisted up on by Ernst Bloch, that is, thinking concretely about the 'not yet'.[1] 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 [added emphasis]'. In the media landscape too, we need to identify agencies and processes of change; in fact, the current gaps in our concepts of citizenship require us to do so.

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, but, for the sake of clarity, I must just mention why I hold to the term 'alternative media' and in what sense.

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 to leave out politics when _defining_ what it is we should study. But if we adopt the term 'alternative media' because it less obviously involves specific political judgements, the question then arises: 'alternative' to what? Not necessarily alternative to

mainstream political positions, nor necessarily to mainstream media operations, as we shall see. By 'alternative media', I mean instead practices of symbolic production which contest (in some way) media power itself i.e. the concentration of symbolic power in media institutions. This is perhaps an even wider range of practices than have been studied previously under the term 'alternative media'.

I have written elsewhere (Couldry, 2001) about a UK activist called The Umbrella Man who works on various campaigns including disability and pension rights, and he helps illustrate this last point. My interest in him stemmed not so much from his 'politics', but in the strategy he adopted towards media power. He left school early and would not claim himself to be an articulate spokesperson. 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, on 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). He stands with a placard, dressed to attract camera attention: he 'lurks' (as it is put in the celebrity world) in the image frame in order to insinuate his own message into mainstream media narratives.

Yet his alternative media practice – if I can call it that – is clearly articulated as a challenge to the operations of media power. I'm not claiming its effectiveness as 'alternative media', let alone as formal politics. 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 be careful not to 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 it is precisely this weakness, that registers (in reverse) the vast power differentials at stake.

There is another advantage of my definition. By privileging not alternative media practice's positions on formal politics, but its wider concern with the politics of speech, the door is opened to a debate on the conditions for effective democracy in mediated societies. Alternative media in this sense are media practices which contest the terms of contemporary mediated citizenship, a point I develop below.

Challenging the Agenda of Academic Media Research

A concern with media's significance for citizenship is of course shared, even dominant, in media research and across a range of theoretical positions (Murdock, 1999; Hartley, 1999). So why have alternative media practices been for so long marginalised?

Leaving aside possible political explanations, the reasons lie in weaknesses in the agenda of media and communications research. They stem from a general (although fortunately not total) complicity between media studies and the very concentration of symbolic power in media institutions that it should have been studying.

Media themselves were for so long marginalised as an object of academic research that it is perhaps not surprising that many did not prioritise for analysis the

concentration of symbolic power in media institutions themselves. Although Stuart Hall's early, and unfortunately unpublished, essays were an exception (see Couldry, 2000, chapter 1 for discussion), what was needed perhaps was a different paradigm for thinking about the media altogether.

This was provided by Jesus Martin-Barbero's (1993) argument that our research priority should be not media texts or institutions in themselves but the broader social process of mediation which spills out beyond centrally produced and distributed texts into popular interpretations, but also into non-mainstream attempts to mediate the world. Mediation is a complex, stretched out social process, and, however much production and distribution are concentrated in certain sites and networks, there is no reason *a priori* to exclude from research media practices in other sites and through other networks.[2]

Alternative media - that is, media practice, outside institutional centres - are, however, inevitably messy. They operate across many sites and on many scales, with greater or lesser success and breadth of impact. As a result, it often seems more convenient to ignore them, perhaps claiming their impacts are small, or at least under-researched (as John Downing (2000) for example has freely admitted). But that is only justifiable, if alternative media's limited impacts derive from reasons unconnected with our wider research agenda. But, if we are concerned with the broader social process of mediation – characterised by an extremely uneven distribution of symbolic resources – then ignoring alternative media is not only arbitrary, it misses the key point about them: that they are the weapons of the weak. It

also ignores what the geographer Neil Smith (1993) identified as the real, if easily hidden, politics of scale.

In criticising mainstream media studies, I would not want to imply that the place of alternative media in the wider media research agenda is entirely straightforward. In fact, there is a real and <u>unresolved</u> debate about which of two ideal models of media provision best serve democracy: a representative model (media as a necessarily centralised system of production, with participation in production hardly the issue: Corner, 1995; Scannell, 1996) or a participative model (Barbrook, 1994; Couldry, 2000; Debord, 1983;), a question which following Nicholas Garnham (2000) we might see as inherent to modernity itself.[3] This lack of resolution is itself part of the point: there <u>is</u> a debate to be had about the degree to which the centralisation of society's – indeed the world's – symbolic resources is necessary or desirable for democracy, a debate which connects with political theory. But without attention to the real-life contestations of alternative media practice, we can have only half the debate.

Let me now turn directly to these wider connections.

Symbolic Conflict and the Democratic Deficit

Alternative media sit at the intersection 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, some clearly identifiable trends may ensure they will not 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). There are, however, wider problems. The question of what information flows reach us and how we select from them becomes more urgent, not less, as channels increase with media digitalisation 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 comment from the UK 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)

Instead, we should be asking: what 'fields of action . . . are opened up or closed down' by this supposed revolution in media use (Garnham, 2000: 118)? More specifically, will digital media deliver a 'national audience' for politics, as pre-digital media at least claimed to do in the past? Regardless of the issue of digitalisation, to

what extent can media continue to deliver an audience that can plausible stand in for a 'nation' the whose legitimacy of whose boundaries is itself under threat from many sides? Leaving aside the criticisms that can be made of the citizenship resources actually provided by current media (on which, see Giroux, 1999), the issue is the continued legitimacy of political authority itself.

If digital media can no longer deliver even a plausible <u>assumption</u> that a national audience for politics is out there watching, then, as election voting rates also decline to 50% or less, the social legitimacy of elected governments 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 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 are less important than the similarities, since both start from the premise that the state and national parliament's are <u>not</u> 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 since 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?

We cannot however adequately articulate a 'politics of presence' without asking 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 <u>mediated</u> public sphere (a term whose continued usefulness I would defend against its many doubters), and people's attempts to contest those exclusions and hierarchies, not least by becoming media producers themselves.

Alternative media practice is a rich sources of insight here, precisely because it is here 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). So too are mediation practices emerging under the aegis of 'digital divide' policies and development funding across the world. In each case, the long tradition of researching alternative media and participatory media has much to offer today's debates about media's continued contribution to democratic public life.

Conclusion

Let me put my argument for the centrality of alternative media for media research as directly 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 Rodriquez has argued, actively mediating the world <u>is</u> 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 reconnect with 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 <u>name</u> 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 <u>action-reflection</u>'. 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.

In the words of the late Pierre Bourdieu, who of all major social theorists of recent decades, paid greatest attention to the continuing inequalities of symbolic power, we must, whether as theorists or practitioners of alternative media (or both), 'work towards universalising the conditions of access to the universal' (Bourdieu, 1998). Media research can no longer therefore afford to keep the study of alternative media in the shadows. [298o words]

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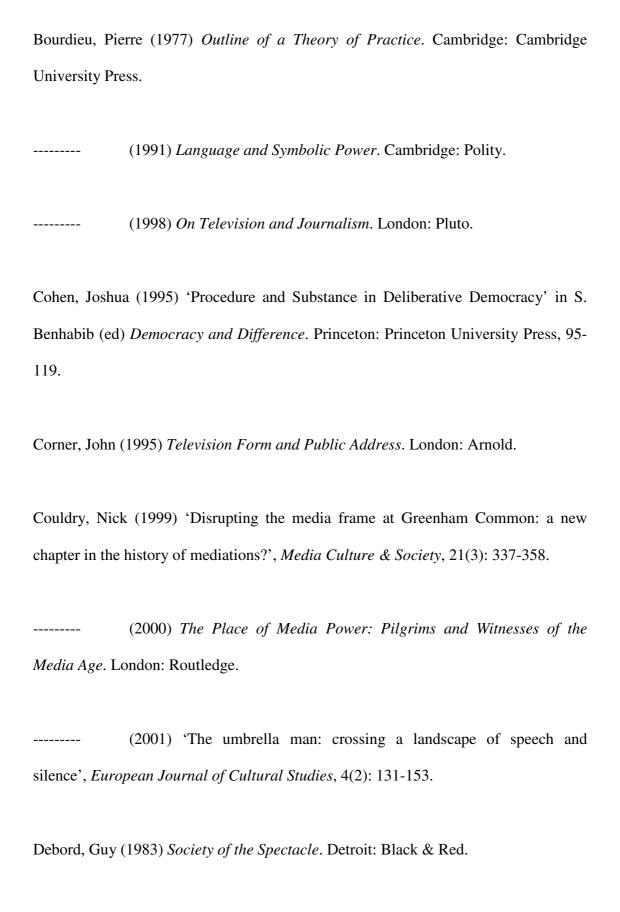
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[1] For important discussion, see Giroux (2001).

[2] It has been taken for granted in audience research on fan practices for more than a decade that dispersed practices of <u>consumption</u> must be taken seriously.

[3] Which makes it all the more unfortunate that Garnham does not acknowledge any role for alternative media here (2000: 68).