

Book: *Alternative Media and the Politics of Resistance: Perspectives and Challenges*

Editors: Mojca Pajnik and John D.H. Downing

Publisher: Ljubljana: Peace Institute, 2008

Reviewer: Dimitra L. Milioni

At the core of Mojca Pajnik and John D.H. Downing's edited volume is an investigation of the diverse ways in which a wide range of social actors use traditional and new alternative media to challenge power. The editors' introduction connects recent developments enabled by Internet and new media technologies with the "very ancient social drive" to communicate "outside, despite and against official and mainstream mass media" (p. 7). While highlighting the significance of "nano-media" for grassroots actors and their potential impact on general publics, the authors also address the limitations of small-scale and new media, as well as the perils involved in practices of 'exclusion by the excluded'.

The first essay in this book, written by Hanno Hardt, presents the issue of conversation in the age of mass and new communication technologies. Hardt's theorization is based on the distinction between 'conversation' and 'talk'. The former is understood as a vital human need to share, as phatic rather than instrumental communication, and as a vital process through which the self is born and projected in the world. Most importantly, conversation is an intersubjective means to arrive to (some kind of) truth and is established on reciprocal equality and agreement to expose rather than hide or bracket differences. Placing conversation in a historical context, the essay narrates its demise in the age where mass media have encroached on public space and "effectively destroyed traditional forms of communication" (p. 19). Mass media-saturated public space offers pseudo-participation in a pseudo-dialogue that alienates citizens from the authentic exchange of ideas and "produces uniformity and standardization" (p. 24).

Today, conversation is degenerated into 'mere' or 'idle' talk, which creates a total subjectivity and satisfies the desire to be heard and to prevail. "The result is a cacophony of simultaneous monologues designed to control, but also to reinforce the importance of immediacy" (p. 18). The effect of new, internet-based media and mobile telephones on social communication is less straightforward: although they offer opportunities for individual empowerment, in terms of control over the process of communication or access to information, they "promote mere talk or chatter" (p. 22) instead of stimulating critical conversation. Due to the lack of new media literacy and their commercial character, new media fail to revive conversational practices that would enable the articulation of discourses of resistance. The issue raised by Hardt is at the core of the discussion about the impact of the internet and new media on contemporary politics.

In his theorization of conversation, Hardt is careful not to ground his analysis on overly formalized, possibly elitist, and highly demanding ideals of political discussion. Yet, the often interchangeable use of terms such as conversation, dialogue, discourse, speech, and talk, lessens the conceptual clarity of this analysis, leaving the reader somewhat puzzled as to what constitutes 'good conversation'. This is amplified when applied to the extremely complex ecosystem of new media that produces very diverse experiences for their users, including examples of stimulating opinion exchange and critical negotiation of identities. However, in relation to the fragmentation of the public space into homogeneous enclaves confined in self-referential discourses, Hardt is right in pointing out how essential good conversation is, in online and offline contexts alike, which leads to a crucial question: how to create effective and sustainable models of 'good conversation' in the public spaces provided by new communication technologies?

Chris Atton's chapter approaches alternative media as journalistic products, with particular focus on their relationship to their mainstream counterparts. To do so, he draws on Bourdieu's field theory to examine alternative media production within the larger journalistic field. Atton, distancing himself from earlier overly celebratory theorizations, opts for a critical, demystifying approach to alternative media which takes into account existing practices of "framing, representation, discourse, ethics and norms in alternative media" (p. 32). Atton is careful to stress the hybridity of alternative media, illustrating how they draw from existing journalistic forms and methods, even as they challenge, subvert or redefine them.

Placing alternative journalism projects in a continuum (rather than two opposing ends) of small-scale and large-scale journalistic sub-fields allows him to account for hybrid forms of alternative media, according to their differences in economic and cultural capital and their relative distance not only from established journalistic forms but also from the field of activism. On more practical grounds of sourcing, representation and objectivity, this chapter shows how alternative media challenge key professional journalistic ethics and re-invent trustworthiness in terms of transparent biases and a (more or less) clearly proclamation of ideological agendas. Atton also identifies the limits of this approach in classifying specific alternative journalistic projects, such as

Big Issue or OhmyNews. This reservation becomes even more relevant if we consider the vast majority of blogging activity which, despite the creation of new positions of speech, replicates and reproduces mainstream content. By this I want to stress how important it is not to lose sight of the decisive determinant of 'alternativeness', that is, the extent to which different media seek to redress power inequalities in society.

Citizen empowerment is the focus of the next chapter on social movement media and democracy, written by John D.H. Downing. Downing begins by criticizing recent academic works that either deploy 'communication' as a vague, almost mystical notion that underlies the global activity of contemporary social movements or enthusiastically propose the form of net activism as the single or the most prominent model of media activism today. Instead, he stresses the importance of grounded, careful, and critical "reflection on all forms of media communication, movement and mainstream" (p. 53). Downing offers some useful recommendations to both media researchers, for analyzing and understanding the complex field of contemporary mainstream and alternative media, and media activists, for developing strong media.

Media activists can benefit from realizing the complementarity of different kinds of activist media (the movement for mainstream media reform and social movement media), in working in concert to increase citizens' awareness about alarming developments in media and politics. Downing also draws attention to the risk of overestimating the potential of internet-based media activism to produce lasting results, as well as the unnecessary exclusion of general publics, as a result of a strictly 'informational' and rationalist philosophy that overstresses the delivery of hard facts as the only prerequisite for political mobilization. Lastly, according to Downing, to deny the impact of alternative media by virtue of their small circulation is a conceptual error, which overlooks the profound effects that alternative media have on those social groups that are in most need of empowerment.

Natalie Fenton takes up the crucial issue of resistance and its complex relation to internet activism and the politics of contemporary transnational, decentralized and networked social movements. Instead of asking, as is often done, whether new media create a new form of political activism, Fenton breaks down this question into two separate subthemes: she examines, firstly, what is the meaning of resistance in today's politics, and secondly, what is the potential of the Internet in facilitating constructive social change. In addressing the latter, while she acknowledges the enormous importance of the internet for activist mobilization, she does not ascribe to its technological and social characteristics any intrinsic democratizing power; rather, she locates the realization of democratic potential "only through the agents who engage in reflexive and democratic activity" (p. 68).

After examining carefully the tug-of-war between optimistic (Hardt and Negri) and pessimistic (Bauman) accounts of today's readiness for bringing about social change, she further unfolds her argument on the twin axes of particularity and universality, commonality and difference. Fenton calls explicitly and lucidly for the transition from a politics of resistance or protest to (a) viable political project(s) with "both a vision and a means of material realization" (p. 62), with universal and common values that will also account for difference – even with the inevitable closure and exclusions that such a transition entails. Yet, one cannot but wonder how such a political culture, coherent vision and political program can develop in novel, non-traditional ways if not through the lingering, tentative, global and particular experiments in the laboratories of the fluid and loose oppositional networks of the lifeworld.

Gabriele Hadl and Jo Dongwon undertake the daunting task of developing a comprehensive conceptual map to navigate across the divergent practices of the "media made by and for the people" (p. 81). The authors, after critically reviewing older approaches to non-mainstream media under the umbrella terms "community media" and "alternative media", set out to evaluate a set of newer concepts that have been configured out of recently emerged practices within new social movements and tactical activist interventions. "Autonomous media", rooted in leftist social movements, take a firm and uncompromising rejective standpoint against all commercial or governmental media, but their power to effect changes is constrained by internal oppression issues and introversive tendencies. "Tactical media", drawing on post-modern thinking, reject the counter-information model as strategic and dogmatic and celebrate the use of entertainment and apparently trivial actions for subverting mainstream discourses, but their potential for shaping viable alternative is seriously disputed.

Hadl and Jo argue in favor of a "civil society media" approach, as a way to bridge "unproductive schisms" between alternative and community media traditions (p. 93) and to encompass diverse grassroots media practices into "a revival force for civil society and the decolonization of the lifeworld" (p. 96). Drawing on the Korean experience, the authors conclude by calling for the production of new theories to serve the needs of alternative media practitioners all over the world that can emerge through the collaboration of activists and

researchers across traditional separations. Hadl and Jo offer a critical and comprehensive review of existing approaches to non-mainstream media in a systematic way and with remarkable analytic precision. At the same time, they propose a simple but not simplistic outline for charting the entire contemporary mediascape and set out to develop a promising model for researchers wishing to endeavor in methodical analysis of civil society media.

Pantelis Vatikiotis' contribution examines the role of alternative media practices as a mediating factor between public sphere and civil society and its significance for enacting citizenship. In this chapter it is argued that the common feature of the "colourful tapestry of media practices on the margins" (p. 112) is the articulation of a compelling demand for the overall democratization of communication. Central to this process is the dynamic and dialectical interplay between public sphere and civil society; the latter is the ground where citizenship, as a form of identity, is actively articulated and constantly negotiated, before it is introduced in the public domain through mediated forms of representation and participation, which in turn is deepened and broadened as a result. However, Vatikiotis argues, the effectiveness of this structure is dependent on the extent to which alternative media practices and ethics enable communication processes "without closure" and leave room for "mutual recognition" (p. 118-119).

These concerns are valid, but at the same time they reintroduce the tension between universality and particularity, elaborated by Fenton, and raise questions about the *raison d'être* of alternative media and their counterpublics. Is it fair to judge them by the normative principles of the liberal model of the press (the very principles they challenge) – and by which they will always be found lacking? Is the bracketing of ideological stances and the demand for 'impartial partiality' a feasible and reasonable goal? The issue of citizenship, as a universal, overarching identity that accommodates and interacts with partial identities, may be key to a "dynamic understanding of the constitution as an unfinished project" (Habermas, 1996: 384) and the role of alternative media therein.

Larisa Rankovic's chapter recounts the turbulent history of the Serbian media during the last three decades and traces the varied meanings of "alternative" in the media context in different sociopolitical conditions. During the Milošević's regime in the 1990s alternative is synonymous with freedom of expression and the efforts to counterbalance official propaganda canalized through state-controlled media. The well-known Radio B92 went a step further, by advocating not only for the overthrow of Milošević's rule but also for broad and deep progressive sociopolitical changes, and by promoting alternative subcultures and lifestyles. After the fall of Milošević, amidst a timid governmental reform program in broadcast media regulation and problems with law enforcement that resulted in a chaotic mediascape and opaque media ownership, characteristic of the Southern European media landscape, the alternative B92 pulled away from the margins and occupied the space left void by the incomplete process of the development of a strong commercial media sector.

Rankovic argues that "Serbian media at present operate in a period in between their alternative pasts and a (putative) alternative future for some of them" (p. 126), placing her hopes on the – currently under way – development of internet media. Although this essay's contribution to a theoretical discussion is less developed, it points out the need to assume non-essentialist and non-static approaches towards alternative media and the importance of analyzing them in relation not only to the general media environment but also to nation-specific political and sociocultural historical conditions. Within this framework, this case also illustrates the additional difficulties for (potential) oppositional media in times when the forces they wish to oppose are unconsolidated and elusive.

Ruth Heritage's essay explores Undercurrents' 1990s video magazines as a case study of activist-generated content that predates the recent trend within mainstream media of including footage produced by audiences, usually referred to as user-generated content (UGC). Heritage argues that Undercurrents, as a grassroots media organization, constructed an activist citizenship in its intersection with mainstream media tropes and content. More specifically, video activists borrowed personalized and localized documentary narrative structures, such as the format of the diary formerly used by the BBC participatory project Video Nation, to legitimize activist representations, identities and agendas.

Mainstream media content was also used in subversive ways, as "activist editing" was used to negotiate and contravene mainstream reporting and representations. Activists were trained to produce an "activist aesthetic" in documentary production, while distribution was based on community building and networking among activists and interested publics. Heritage concludes by recognizing the limits of this video activism project in reaching wider audiences but also as a "truly dialogic form of media" (p. 159). This chapter illustrates an interesting case of alternative media production, although the reader would benefit from a more lucid discussion of the

connection of the Undercurrents project with the notion of network society. Also, although Heritage contrasts this type of grassroots video activism with current ideas of UGC in mainstream outlets as “citizen journalism”, this complex relation is not explored far enough.

Overall, this volume provides a stimulating discussion that further advances the newly established field of alternative media studies. Although original empirical work is underrepresented in this collection, this lack is counterbalanced by a set of insightful and intriguing theoretical approaches from a variety of angles that offer inspiring conceptual tools for future research. By and large, the book is a significant contribution to the current debate about alternative media that anyone working in this field should read.

Dimitra L. Milioni is a lecturer at the Department of Communication and Internet Studies, Cyprus University of Technology, Limassol, Cyprus. e-mail: Dimitra.Milioni@cut.ac.cy

References

Habermas, J. (1996) *Between facts and norms: Contributions to a discourse theory of law and democracy*. Cambridge: Polity.