Between "identity politics" and "politics of influence": the role of alternative media in the Greek protests in 2008

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Abstract

In December 2008 the killing of a teenager by a Greek policeman in central Athens set off the fiercest social unrest the country has witnessed in recent decades. For almost three weeks, thousands of angry youths participated in mass demonstrations, in many cases resulting in rioting, looting and violent clashes with the police. Although new media technologies were heavily used by protesters, their role in the December 2008 events has not been systematically studied.

This paper explores how the "Greek Riots" in 2008 were reported in the alternative news network Indymedia Athens. A key question the study addresses is whether grassroots reporting in Indymedia Athens served activists' need for communication and solidarity building ("politics of identity") or functioned also as an "out-group" communication channel that could counter negative mainstream reporting and communicate protesters' messages to a wider population ("politics of inclusion"). The findings show that during the first eight crucial days of the protests, the alternative outlet functioned first and foremost as a tool for coordination and creation of identity, through the exchange of mobilization information and direct action news. A frame analysis of thematic posts shows that compelling counterframes are created by protesters' narrations, but their potential to effectively challenge mainstream discourses and influence wider publics is unclear.

Keywords: protest, alternative media, Greece, framing, social movements

O N 6 DECEMBER 2008, 15-year-old Alexis Grigoropoulos was shot dead by a police officer in the Exarchia district in Athens. Within hours, widespread protests erupted, which culminated in the fiercest unrest the country has witnessed in recent decades. For three weeks, thousands of angry youths participated in country-wide demonstrations, sit-ins, occupations,
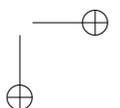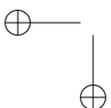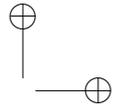
clashes with the police and extensive rioting and looting. As protesters made extensive use of the internet and their mobile phones to organize and coordinate their activities, protests spread fast to all major Greek cities and several European capitals, recalling the French civil unrest in 2005 and 2006. This 'no ordinary protest' (Kalyvas, 2010: 351) entailed mobilizations that were largely spontaneous and unstructured. Precisely because the unusual nature of the protests rendered their deeper roots obscure, their legitimacy and their potential to bring about change depended on the effective communication of their motivating causes.

As Owens and Palmer (2003: 335) have argued, "traditionally, radical social movements faced a dilemma regarding media coverage: focus either on mass media, but lose control of their representation, or on alternative media, but fail to get their message to the broader public". Indeed, mainstream media have been long criticized for constructing social reality in favor of the status-quo and against social movements – even more so when the latter employ radical modes of action, such as Black Bloc tactics or civil disobedience. This tendency is rendered more evident on occasions of protest coverage, where mass media have been found guilty of exaggerating violence, oversimplifying, and mis- or under-representing activists' perspectives. Protesting actors, then, have a hard time winning mass media interest and support, particularly in situations that involve violence and chaos.

The deprecatory media treatment of radical social actors renders alternative media particularly important as carriers of counterdiscourses, as they "seek to redress [. . .] an imbalance of media power in mainstream media, which results in the marginalisation (at worst, the demonisation) of certain social and cultural groups and movements" (Atton, 2007: 18). However, the field of alternative media production has its own weaknesses, the most important being its limited distribution, or what Atton (2002: 33-35) has called the "alternative ghetto". To a great extent, the problem of reach has been mitigated by online communication technologies, as the new media ecology offers unprecedented opportunities for spreading out dissenting messages. The internet has proved a valuable resource for transnational coordination and inter-movement connections, forming a basis for building solidarity among diverse progressive social actors (Bennett, 2003; Carroll & Hackett, 2006; Castells, 1997; Garrett, 2006; Owens & Palmer, 2003). However, it is less clear whether online alternative media can have an impact beyond the activist
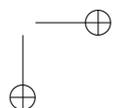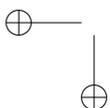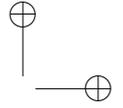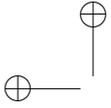
communities they foremost serve, especially in times of radical protest, and influence the ways in which social issues are discussed and interpreted in the general public sphere. Online presence and visibility is no guarantee that new audiences will be drawn to alternative sources nor that the content in those sources will effectively counter delegitimizing portrayals of dissent produced by mass media.

The study attempts to shed light on a underresearched topic, namely the reporting and framing of radical protest in alternative media. It combines content and framing analysis of posts published in the prominent alternative news website Indymedia Athens to address a number of questions. How were the Greek protests in 2008 reported in alternative media? Did episodic or thematic reporting prevail? Which (counter)frames were produced as oppositional discourses to the mainstream depiction of protests? Finally, were these counterdiscourses likely to cross the boundaries of the alternative media realm and challenge hegemonic discourses in the broader public sphere?

Civil society, protest and the media

The field of alternative media, a "colourful tapestry of media practices on the margins" (Vatikiotis, 2008: 112) that encompasses a remarkably wide and diverse range of spaces and processes for the creation of meaning, resists clear-cut definitions and delineations. Bailey et al. (2008: 4) rightly assert that "to understand (the importance of) alternative media we need to situate them in the political and democratic theories that have provided theoretical and intellectual support for their identities and practices". Most scholarly accounts that attempt to theorize alternative media place them firmly within the contours of civil society and the continuous project of its self-democratization (Bailey et al., 2008; Hadl & Dongwon, 2008). Key actors in this process are social movements, which according to Cohen and Arato (1992: ix) comprise civil society, together with the intimate sphere, the sphere of associations and forms of public communication.

Cohen and Arato highlight two important dimensions of movements' discursive politics: the "politics of identity" and the "politics of influence". The politics of identity involves the efforts of collective actors to discover, shape and consolidate identities, create new meanings and redefine cultural norms
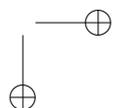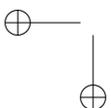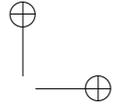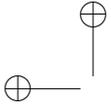
and social roles. This discursive activity, which targets civil society itself, unfolds within subcultural counterpublics and counterinstitutions (Habermas, 1996: 369-370). The politics of influence targets political society and public opinion, as it aims at "altering the universe of political discourse to accommodate new need-interpretations, new identities, and new norms" (Cohen & Arato, 1992: 526). In this process, collective action intends to influence public opinion as well as exert pressure on actors of the formal political system (Habermas, 1996: 369-370). Cohen and Arato attach particular importance to this type of collective action in being "the only means of displacing movement fundamentalism and blocking the road to political elitism" (1992: 563). Both Habermas (1996) and Cohen and Arato (1992) consider protest politics and civil disobedience one of the most important means for ordinary citizens to exert influence in the public sphere. Mediated communication practices (both in their mainstream and radical-alternative forms) are pivotal in this process.

Protest and mainstream media

Protest is directed at four groups: (a) activists (in order to raise solidarity and sustain social movements), (b) third parties that can provide support to protesters' goals, (c) authorities that can address protesters' demands, and (d) the media, in order to maximize exposure to the broader public (Lipsky, 1968 in Owens & Palmer, 2003: 337). To the extent that the majority of the population continues to shape its understanding of the world through mass-mediated texts, mainstream media are still relevant for protesters' politics of inclusion, aiming at raising consciousness and mobilizing broader publics. In critical media literature there is a well-grounded concern regarding the "pro-establishment orientation" in mainstream reporting of protest (Hertog & McLeod, 1988: 23; Juris, 2008) and its effects on audience perceptions about protesting social actors (especially groups labeled "deviant") and the issues they seek to raise (Gans, 1979; Gitlin, 1980). Smith et al. (2001: 1398) identify two levels of bias in media representation of social protest: selection bias, which refers to the media agenda-setting function (Myers & Caniglia, 2004), and description bias, which is evident in the framing of protest.

A principal framing effect is the *marginalization* of protesting actors, which results mainly from "disruption of social order" frames. Such accounts overstate chaos and vandalism and depict demonstrators as instigators
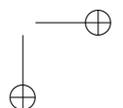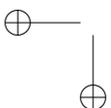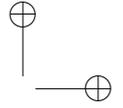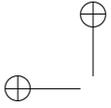
of violence, law-breakers and criminals, while understating peaceful aspects of protests and misperceiving symbolic actions (Boykoff, 2006; Hertog & McLeod, 1988; Jha, 2008). A second framing effect is the *decontextualisation* of social protest that ensues as protesters are pit against law enforcers, rather than the forces they really oppose to. Mass media attention to the rationale of protest actions is rare; even when such attention is granted, it lacks thorough articulation so that protests make sense to the general public (Hertog & McLeod, 1988: 11-12, 25). Iyengar's work (1991) has exemplified the use of episodic and thematic news frames, producing event- and issue-oriented news stories respectively, which are connected to attributions of responsibility and inferences about proper policy measures. Decontextualisation is amplified by stressing individual responsibility rather than systemic causes (Smith et al., 2001: 1404) and by illustrating protesters' claims as "single grievances which the system, however reluctantly, can correct without altering fundamental social relations" (Gitlin, 1980). Personification is also used to screen out the complex factors that compose protest events, shifting away public focus from a productive dialogue about the issues at hand (Watkins, 2001).

Have these trends remain unchanged over time? Cottle (2008: 858) refers to several recent studies that point to "the variable, shifting and sometimes more progressive alignments of the news media's reporting of demonstrations and protests than in the past". For instance, Klein et al. (2009) found that US news media coverage of the Iraq war in 2006 included new counterframes to the original war story (cf. Peng, 2008) that emerged through sourcing of non-elite actors that opposed the war.

Although Cottle is right in pointing out that "relatively static ideas of news 'frames' as well as entrenched expectations based on past findings may prove insensitive to the political contingencies and dynamics at work in contemporary protest and demonstration reporting" (2008: 858), there is evidence that protesting actors still have a hard time winning mass media interest and support, particularly in situations that involve violence and chaos. Jha (2007) reports that journalistic coverage of anti-Vietnam protests in the 1960s and of anti-WTO protests in 1999 manifest similar characteristics: heavy reliance on official sources, episodic frames, and a negative valence to protesters' stories. Cushion (2007), in his study on British press coverage of young anti-Iraq war protesters, discusses how press coverage shifted notably from positive, before the war, to negative, after the war had started. As the support of the press
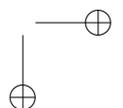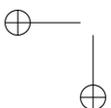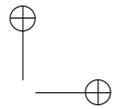
waned, positive coverage faded and familiar news frames appeared in news stories: the depiction of young protesters as "truants" and the dismissal of their political agency, the portrayal of protesters as disruptive of everyday life and as a "threat to the social order" and a disproportionate focus on violence and the role of police forces as peace keepers (ibid: 427-431). Such framing practices have been explained with reference to professional practices firmly embedded in established journalistic routines and codes, such as the heavy reliance on and lack of skepticism towards official sources and their primary definitions (Hall et al., 1978). Professional journalists, then, have been traditionally averse to giving a voice to "unofficial, unconventional and unreliable social actors" (Jha, 2008: 728).

Protest and alternative media

Under these circumstances, the role of alternative media in civil society is rendered crucial, especially in the course of social protest. Downing (2001: 23) argues that movements and radical media are dialectically and acutely interdependent, as movements both generate and are stimulated by radical media. Their importance for collective actors can be identified in terms of their dual politics of identity and influence. Regarding politics of identity, alternative media, facilitated by new communication technologies, offer counterpublics and subaltern groups the symbolic means to contest or rupture established ideological meanings. Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpentier (2008: 17) capture these dynamics well:

> [. . .] subordinated groups exercise their power to contest hegemonic meanings through a discursive practice of resistance that is, to produce nonconformist and sometimes counter-hegemonic representations of the views of those marginalized, misrepresented and under-represented in the public sphere. Alternative media are one of the many available sites that provide these societal groups (and others) with the opportunity to produce these non-conformist and counterhegemonic representations.

These spaces can be seen as prerequisites of protest action (and political action in general, for that matter), as social processes and relations that are developed therein can foster self-education and political empowerment of ordinary people (Rodriguez, 2000). Moreover, alternative media are invaluable tools for activists and social movements as resources for acquiring the knowl-

edge they need to advance their causes, as sources for mobilizing information, as means for articulating identities and forging solidarities (Rauch, 2007: 996-997) and as nodes for linking together different movements that act in concert to advance common goals (Carroll & Hackett, 2006). Thus, alternative media empower civil society actors to engage in political action within organized configurations, *ad hoc* campaigns or protest politics.
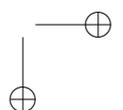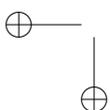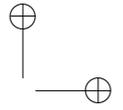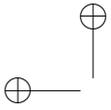
The process of *exerting influence* in the public sphere is a dimension of equal importance. Protesters create discourses through direct action on the street (Juris, 2008), which is a form of public speech and, in most cases, discursive and persuasive in nature, aiming at forcing the majority to listen to counterarguments in the hope that it will change its mind (Cohen & Arato, 1992: 573-574, 583-584). As most forms of public speech in contemporary societies, these discourses are mediated by the formal circuits and modes of representation and interpretation of mainstream media.

Alternative media are important to protesting actors as means of wider influence at two levels. First, alternative spaces online, which allow protesters to retain a high degree of control over meaning production, can be used as sources for mainstream media for the coverage of protest. At this level, alternative media *can function as agenda-builders* and help social movements attract media attention and influence media agendas. Such is the case of the recent dramatic spring 2011 uprisings in the Mediterranean Arabian countries, in which digital social networks played a crucial role not only in coordinating protests but also in feeding the news instantly and constantly to the most influential news agencies and media organizations across the world.

Despite these examples, a mainstream media "open gate policy" to protesting actors cannot be taken for granted. The capacity of social movement media to influence media narratives has obvious limits, the most important being the limited spill-over effect from alternative outlets to established media institutions. Song (2007), in her study of the agenda-setting potential of South Korean alternative protest reporting, did not find a clear and linear intermedia agenda effect. Similarly, Jha reports that although media professionals are aware of alternative sources, they dismiss them, predominantly because of their lack of credibility, their partisan character, and their sheer number (2008: 717-718). It seems, then, that despite the abundance of relevant information on offer by social movement media and much discussion about shifts toward participatory models of journalism, there is still considerable resistance on the
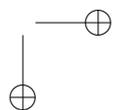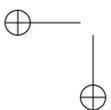
part of professional journalists to open up crucial processes of news making to non-professional actors (Singer et al., 2011) and hence diversify protest coverage.

The negative frames found in much mainstream media reporting as well as their reluctance to expand their sourcing practices draw attention to the capacity of alternative media to influence public opinion at a second level: the *reception of mainstream media content*. At this level, alternative media may work as "alternative benchmarks" against which audiences can evaluate news coverage and engage critically with news texts (Manning, 2001). Despite the lack of abundant empirical findings about the reception of alternative content (Downing, 2003: 625), it is assumed that the provision of counterinformation and oppositional interpretations, the nourishment of a critical stance towards mainstream media content and the creation of public fora for critical discussion of dominant media messages can contribute to building a "counter-hegemonic consciousness" (Hartley, 1982: 135, cited in Harcup, 2003: 367). Thus, alternative information, representations and interpretations about social protests can build up audiences' semiotic resistance which can be used to critically decode the depiction of protest as media spectacle and the disfiguring of its symbolic language.

An example from the Greek riots in 2008 that illustrates how alternative media can contest dominant codes is the contrasting accounts of the role of immigrants in those protests. Kalyvas (2010: 357) recounts how the political character of immigrants' participation in the protests was completely negated in mainstream media accounts, as they were made to fit the familiar and hegemonic constructed category of the 'criminal'. On the contrary, the online space where immigrants articulated their own perspective communicated explicitly the political agency of immigrants, voicing lucidly a claim for dignity and respect, inclusion and equality (see Milioni & Panos, 2011). In many cases, alternative or ordinary voices challenge media frames (Cooper, 2010), deny familiar depictions of the "people" (e.g. as "victims") and assert the right to relay their "truth" (Karlsson, 2010; Robinson, 2009). Alternative media, then, as *oppositional definers* committed to "privileging the powerless and the marginal and offering a perspective 'from below'" (Harcup, 2003: 371), are important not only as a counterbalance to traditional gatekeepers but also as sources for the new communicators in the various overlapping media spheres.
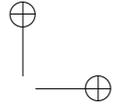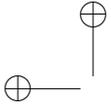
Research questions

Within this theoretical framework, we set out to examine the role alternative media play in times of social unrest, focusing on the reporting of the violent protests that shook Greece in December 2008 in the prominent alternative website *Athens Independent Media Center* (Indymedia). Although the importance of communication technologies for the coordination of protests and the creation of an alternative public sphere has been recognized in various studies, the specific functions of alternative media in this uprising have not been systematically researched (Vatikiotis, 2011). This paper, attempting to fill this gap, aims at determining whether the use of alternative media by protesting actors served mainly in-group communication purposes (politics of identity) or could also serve a "politics of influence", acting as a platform through which new voices and counterdiscourses could be communicated to the general public, directly or through professional newsmaking. It poses, therefore, three research questions: First, what were the specific functions of posts published in Indymedia during the protests of December 2008? Second, to what extent Indymedia contained episodic and thematic accounts about the protests? Third, how was social protest framed in thematic posts of Indymedia? In what follows, the case under study, the method and the coding scheme are presented in detail.

Methodology

Short description of the "Greek riots" in 2008

In December 2008, after the killing of a teenager by a patrolling police officer in central Athens, Greece was shaken by violent protests. For three weeks, largely spontaneous and leaderless demonstrations took place in several Greek cities, many of which resulted in clashes with police forces, rioting and looting. The events themselves were characterized as "unprecedented and incomparable to any previous civic disturbance in post-World War II Greece" (Kalyvas, 2010: 351-352). Such widespread social unrest – radical, violent and destructive, "at the edges of and beyond legality" (ibid: 353-354) – is not a unique Greek phenomenon; in the first week of August 2011, the "England riots", which involved widespread rioting and looting in many London areas
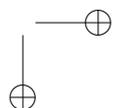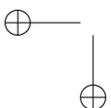
and other UK cities, were characterized as "the worst disturbances of their kind since the 1995 Brixton riots" (Lewis, 2011). As in the French unrest in 2005 and 2006 (Tønnevold, 2009), the use of internet media and mobile phones by UK protesters was so extensive that commentators included "technology and social networking" as a possible cause of the riots (BBC, 2011; Mackenzie, 2011).

New media were used considerably also by Greek protesters in 2008 as coordinating and organizational tools. Mailing lists, forums, blogs, Facebook, mobile phones as well as alternative news platforms were the main means of information exchange between the loose networks and dense clusters of participants. From the outset, Saturday's news about the shooting of Alexis Grigoropoulos in Exarcheia district, transmitted through mobile phones and the Athens Indymedia website, reached sufficient numbers so as to spur in-area demonstrations and riots within just two hours. By Sunday, high school students had used texting to organize and activate Monday-morning school occupations (Tzatha, 2009: 12). The role of the alternative news website Indymedia Athens was also pivotal [1]. Throughout the December 2008 mobilizations, it functioned as a central hub, where accounts of events in various geographic locations were directly posted or re-posted from the blogosphere and other sources (Tzatha, 2009). For this reason, coupled with the fact it constitutes a well-established and paradigmatic case of online alternative media, Indymedia Athens was selected as a source for data analysis.

Sampling and coding scheme

The sample of this study includes every post published in IMC Athens, either as news or comment attached to posted news, during the first eight days from the event that triggered the protests in Greece. A sample of consecutive days was preferred to a random selection, because during this first week of the protests the news coverage in Indymedia as well as the intensity of actual events reached their peak. To locate relevant posts, the thematic archive of

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1. Since 2001, the Indymedia Athens website is a local branch of the global Indymedia alternative news network and functions as a reference point for the publishing of protest news during times of social unrest. Based on the open publishing principle (Platon and Deuze, 2003), it allows users to publish anonymously and instantaneously news and opinions about events and issues not covered by institutional media.
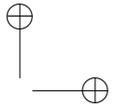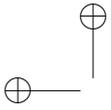
Indymedia Athens was used, which included a special category for the "events of December 2008"[2]. The single post was defined as the unit of analysis. The total number of analyzed unique posts is 3185; from these, 750 are news posts (that is, posts that appeared in the newswire and sometimes started a thread of messages), 59 are opinion posts published in the forum, and 2376 are comments attached to news and opinion posts. All analyzed posts were published between 6.12.2008 and 13.12.2008. The study employed a mixed-method approach, using content analysis to determine the functions of the posts and the type of protest coverage, and framing analysis to identify frames and discourses of protest.

The first research question asked what were the specific functions of posts published in Indymedia during the December 2008 protests. To determine these, posts were coded as a) News, b) Discussion/Opinion or c) Coordination of protest activities. In case a post belonged to more than one category, its predominant function was determined by word count. These categories were further broken down to subcategories. News were divided to a) news stories reprinted from mass media, and b) original news, which comprised of protesters' or eyewitnesses' accounts, news stories from interpersonal sources or other alternative or independent media, blogs, formal and informal institutions. Reports about events preceding the time of writing and straight "live coverage" also fell into the News category. The category of Discussion/Opinion comprised of a) analyses, that is, opinion articles by individuals and elaborate declarations or press releases by various groups or organizations, and b) commentary, that is, brief statements of opinion or emotion (e.g. acclamation comments), mottos and questions. Posts were coded as facilitating Coordination when they were a) offering mobilization information about future protests or about events occurring at the time of writing (e.g. instructions to join demonstrations or information about police movements) b) asking for related information (e.g. how to join a demonstration) and c) explicitly calling for action and support (e.g. calls for participation in demonstrations).

The second research question asked to what extent Indymedia contained episodic and thematic accounts of the protests. As discussed above, the presence of thematic stories in news media is very significant for protesters, because they allow thorough discussion of the issues they seek to raise. How-

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2. Posts in Indymedia are thematically categorized by their authors or the editorial team.
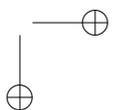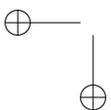
ever, thematic protest coverage in mainstream media is rare; moreover, it tends to wane when disorder becomes "breaking news" (Jha, 2008: 719, 721). In the case under study, thematic reporting was especially important due to the highly unstructured nature of the protests and their confrontational and controversial character, which is associated with negative coverage by mainstream media that obscures the messages protesters seek to get across. Therefore, Indymedia was expected to include extensive thematic coverage of protests, highlighting the reasons and justifications of the protests. To explore this question, as *episodic* were coded strictly descriptive posts, which did not provide a comprehensive presentation of the rationale behind the protests. Simple references to emotions (such as rage) or brief mentions to the triggering event or to police repression in general, were not considered thematic. As *thematic* were coded posts that provided background information and explained at least one of the following: the rationale, the causes or the demands of the protesters. A *mixed* category was available for posts that could not clearly be recognized as either episodic or thematic.

Throughout the study, only written text was content analyzed. The coding of all posts was first carried out by the author. To ensure reliability, a second coder, after attending several training sessions where coding rules were discussed, coded independently a randomly selected 21% of the posts (n=680) – a percentage larger than the adequate baseline of 10% (Riffe et al., 2005). Cohen's Kappa was used to calculate intercoder reliability. The reliability coefficients were between .74 and .85 for all variables, which are considered acceptable scores.

The final research question aimed at identifying how protest was framed in thematic posts of Indymedia. Previous studies have revealed notable differences between alternative and established media frames of protest. Alternative media tend to be sympathetic to social movements' causes, discussing their philosophy and taking the perspective of the participant observer (Hertog & McLeod, 1988: 17, 21), and use frames that lend protests legitimacy (Song, 2007: 85-86). Harcup (2003: 371) argues that "alternative media may offer the possibility of subverting the dominant discourse by providing access to alternative voices, alternative arguments, alternative sets of 'facts', and alternative ways of seeing". In the context of Greek protests in 2008, although a detailed analysis of mass media content is so far lacking, mainstream media coverage is described as overstressing images of riots and destruction (Astri-

naki, 2009: 100-103), overshadowing a wide-ranging public discussion about the socioeconomic causes of the protests and deflecting attention from possible systemic solutions. This said, we sought to discover the frames used by Indymedia users about the protests. Limiting the number of texts for frame analysis was a necessary step to make the analysis manageable. To this end, only thematic posts were chosen for frame analysis (n=222), as these were more elaborate and hence more likely to contain comprehensive frame packages compared to informative posts or short comments.
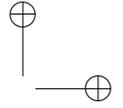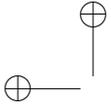
To better capture the rhetorical struggles often involved in the framing of issues, actors and social practices, the study sought to discover the posters' own attributes about the issues in question, rather than look for predefined categories in the texts. The method of constant comparison (Glaser, 1965) was used to identify frames in the posts. Each thematic post was scrutinized to detect and record the frames it included; this process was repeated until no new frames turned up in the posts. After having established the final categories of frames, posts were once more read through carefully and the presence of each frame in each post was recorded to determine the frames' extent in the texts.

Findings and discussion

A simple count of the posts published daily gives an overall picture of the traffic in the Indymedia website during a two-month period. Figure 1 shows the timeline of the posts published in Indymedia from the outburst of protests (6.12.2008) until 31.1.2009 [3]. A closer look at the first eight days shows that, with the exception of two crucial days (8.12.2008 and 9.12.2008) when the website was down due to traffic, activity increases until the seventh day of the protests (Figure 2) and wanes gradually until it drops to under 73 posts per day after 31.1.2009 (Figure 1). It should be noted that the overall number of posts is remarkably high during the first week (between 205 and 637 posts per day).

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3. To assess the overall volume of content published about the protests, all posts published in Indymedia in the relevant thematic category until 31.1.2009 were recorded and counted, but not content-analyzed.
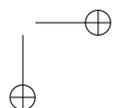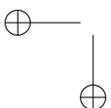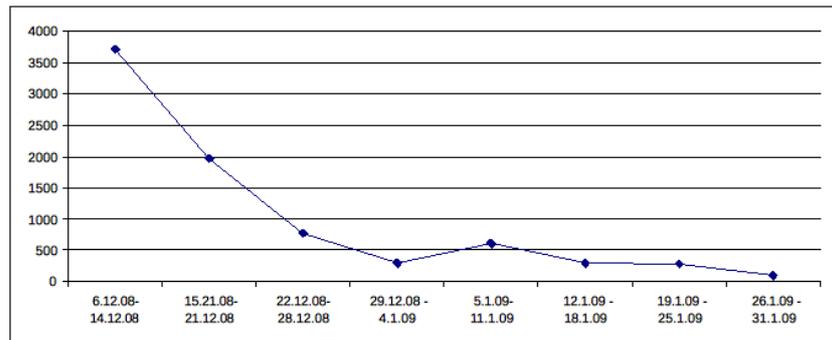
Figure 1: Timeline of number of posts (until 31.1.2009)
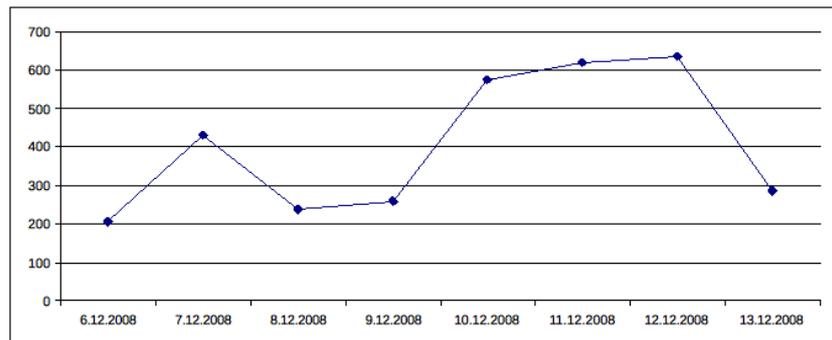
Figure 2: Timeline of number of posts (first eight days)

The role of Indymedia during the protests

The *raison d'être* of the Indymedia network is to practice alternative journalism that "enables the production of news that tells other stories from those reported in the mainstream: 'our news, not theirs'" (Atton, 2004: 35). In the current analysis, the predominant activity in Indymedia Athens is the publication of first-person, partisan news accounts from the "battlefield" (38%), together with posts that enable the coordination of protesters (33%) (Table 1). Taken together, these posts amount to 72% of total posts.

Table 1. Role of Indymedia

	Frequency	Percent
News	1223	38,4%
Discussion & Opinion	831	26,1%
Coordination	1058	33,2%
Other	73	2,3%
Total	3185	100%

This is also a result of the editorial policy of Indymedia Athens during those days, as the editorial team was discouraging users to post comments and opinions due to the *urgency* of the circumstances and the huge traffic on the website:

> When [such] events are occurring throughout Greece, it's not the time for comments and discussion. We ask you to stop commenting on articles – at least as long as demonstrations and protest actions are in progress everywhere. *Right now the priority is to inform and not to express opinions!* (IMC editorial, 12.12, original emphasis).

The editorial team also underscored the need for *accuracy*, advising users to post only verified information. Accuracy of information was vital for protesters, as demonstrations were organized spontaneously, few hours beforehand, by word of mouth and the use of websites, blogs, twitter and text messages. In their posts, users would often share the source of information and ask for cross-checking by other sources. Cross-reference of information was achieved collectively, in an attempt to minimize circulation of rumors that would mislead protesters or discourage citizens from joining the protests (e.g. rumors about intensification of police repression).

Direct-action news was a mix of strictly informative posts – mainly "hard facts" and very brief bulletins about the progress of demonstrations (often in real time) – and "native reporting" (Atton, 2004: 35), namely, passionate, often first-person and partisan accounts, offering detailed description of the protests. Throughout the first days of the protests, Indymedia Athens functioned predominantly as an in-group communication network, oriented primarily to serve the needs of activists for information, but also for strengthening identity and solidarity ties. As one user put it:
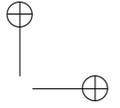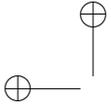
> Every bit of information is important! We need to know! [Information] lifts
> our spirit and gives us strength for what is coming next!!! (IMC Athens,
> 9.12).

In terms of the tone of protest coverage, the prevailing picture drawn is one of "civic war". This includes counting gains and losses after each confrontation in the "battlefield"; extensive use of emotional language and mottos to communicate feelings of rage, anger and hatred against the "enemy" (police forces), as well as calls for revenge for the death of the student. The subjective narration of events is a distinctive feature of alternative reporting: writing from the position of the "activist journalist" entails no claim to objectivity; rather, "truth is not seen as an absolute but as an infinite sampling of perspectives of a given situation" (Platon & Deuze, 2003: 345). A concrete example that illustrates the multiperspectival way in which reality is constructed in open-publishing alternative media is a threaded description of a demonstration that contained different estimations about its size and composition, but also contrasting narrations, depending of the unique lived reality of each protester: one poster reports about how a peaceful demonstration was hit by undue police violence (condemning assaults instigated by protesters), while another acclaims the vigor of the (counter)attacks by Black Bloc protesters.

Moving on to the function of coordination (Table 2) and taking a closer look at the posts coded as serving coordination ends, it is found that one in five (19%) are questions asked by people who were interested in participating in demonstrations, sit-ins, assemblies and other protest actions. Almost 75% of posts in this category responded to this need, offering mobilization information about future actions, about the safest way to join demonstrations in progress, about police movements, contact information for legal advice etc. The remaining seven percent of posts were explicit calls for action. The Indymedia website enabled transnational communication for organization of solidarity protests in other countries (Tsaliki, 2009), as well as coordination on national level. An example of how this was attained follows: On the daybreak of the 10th of December a story was posted regarding rumors spread by the police in the city of Athens about an alleged upcoming orchestrated anarchist attack against commercial shops and small businesses. It was also reported that school students were being systematically targeted and warned to abstain from joining the protests, as extensive riots and arrests were expected. Within several hours, a thread of 42 messages was created where posters from more
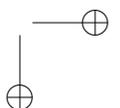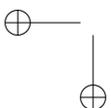
than 20 different cities all over Greece confirmed that a similar action was taking place in their regions too. According to Indymedia users, a police plan to turn ordinary people against the protesters was revealed; therefore, calls and ideas for counterinformation measures followed with the aim to "restore the truth" and the support of public opinion.

Table 2. Role of Indymedia (Coordination)

	Frequency	Percent
Questions	198	19%
Mobilization information	785	74%
Calls for action	75	7%
Total	1058	100%

During the first eight days of the protests, the space devoted to Discussion/Opinion amounts to 26% of total posts. However, most of these posts (n=638) fall into the Commentary subcategory, being brief comments, statements, opinions or emotions, mottos and questions. Thorough analysis of events and their causes amounts only to six percent of total posts (n=193).

Episodic and thematic protest coverage

As noted above, one common form of negative coverage for protesters and social movements is the lack of thematic coverage of protests. Our second research question asked to what extent Indymedia contained episodic and thematic accounts about the protests. Alternative media are expected to include extensive thematic coverage of protests, lucidly explaining the reasons behind the protests and thematizing underlying issues and concerns.

Table 3. Episodic and thematic framing

	Frequency	Percent
Episodic frame	969	80,5%
Thematic frame	**222**	**18,4%**
Mixed frame	13	1,1%
Total	1204	100%

This assumption is not outright confirmed by the current analysis. Table 3 shows that only 18% of the posts about the protests were thematic (n=222). The lack of extensive thematic coverage can work to the detriment of protesting agents, as it renders mainstream media the primary definers of events and interpreters of their meaning (Hall et al., 1978) – such as the depiction of protests as "blind violence instigated by few rioters that were out of control", which was promoted by some Greek mainstream media. Because of the exceptionally controversial nature of the Greek protests, and amidst a heated public discussion regarding the roots of those events, the relative absence of thematic accounts becomes especially salient, as it deprives the general public from an alternative decoding of the meaning of symbolic actions which would render protests comprehensible to the public and decision makers.

The framing of social protest

The third research question asked how protests were framed in thematic posts of Indymedia. According to Entman (1993: 52) "to frame is to *select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation* for the item described" (emphasis in the original). Following Entman's definition, we focused on *who* the causal agents were and *what* they were doing (diagnosis), the reasons behind the protests, the rationale of the protesters and attributions of responsibility (causal interpretation and moral evaluation) and the actions that were suggested to be taken (treatment recommendation). What ensues from the observation of the public discussion about the protests, as was carried out in the mass media, is much controversy about the "*who*", the "*what*" and the "*why*" of the protests, in the form of discursive struggles over competitive definitions of protesting subjects and situations, such as "mass movement", "just uprising" or "justified anger" vs. "rioters and looters", "mislead youth" or "blind rage".

Diagnosis

At the diagnosis level, regarding the question about *who* the causal agents were, the most dominant frame, present in 80% of the articles, was the des-

ignation of protesting agents as a *movement* – albeit one that lacked formal organization, central leadership and common positions:
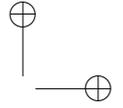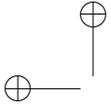
> "The thousands of people who take to the streets every day and demonstrate are not some fringe groups. It a social and political movement" (user, IMC Athens, 10.12)

In these posts, emphasis was put on the unprecedented size of the protests and the diversity of the demonstrators, which composed not only by leftists, anarchists or extremists, but also by school and university students and their parents, workers, unemployed and people of all ages:

> "A wave of excluded, disappointed, repressed, desperate people flooded the streets, of diverse cultural background, education, experience and class and were united in a spontaneous cry of a society that is being suppressed, deprived of its future, that is watching its dreams being crushed" (user, IMC Athens, 11.12)

Even when the "middle Greek" was not reported to participate in the demonstrations, manifestations of support by "ordinary people" were emphatically described. Protesters, then, identified with and felt they represented the "people" ("We want the people by our side. WE ARE THE PEOPLE", user, IMC Athens, 9.12). Open letters to shopkeepers, parents and fellow citizens constituted (sometimes dramatic) appeals for help and endorsement of the protests. It is worth noting that protesters, in their posts, express that they felt vastly misrepresented by mainstream media coverage, which they saw as systematically distorting protests, by undermining the size and the diversity of the demonstrations, selectively covering only events that involved conflict, holding back information about police provocation that led to clashes, overstressing vandalism, riots, looting and chaos, and failing to convey the symbolic meaning of actions of civil disobedience against selected targets. Users also denounce the use of Manichean schemes to make sense of protests, such as "peacefully protesting school students" against "few violent extremists, criminals and hooligans" and the emphasis on counterprotests by "irate citizens" (according to protesters, members of far-right extremist organizations) and enraged shopkeepers.

A different picture is painted by a less prominent frame, present in 24% of the articles, which made the distinction between "peaceful protesters" and "hooligans" (or disguised police forces) who were involved in acts of blind violence and unnecessary destruction.
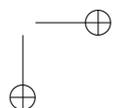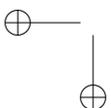
As to the question of *what* protesting agents were doing, the protests were predominantly framed as an *uprising* of the *oppressed* and as a social and political *struggle* of *the people*. Within the "uprising" frame, which was present in 51% of the articles, protesters were reported to engage in peaceful demonstrations, public assemblies and sit-ins, being part of an ongoing political struggle and resistance against oppression.

The frame of "vandalism" emerged in 23% of the articles, but in all cases the issue is discussed and various interpretations and evaluations are put forth (see below). About one fourth (27%) of the articles included a frame of "civic war" ("WE ARE AT WAR", user, IMC Athens, 11.12). The "civic war" frame included reports of clashes with the police and acts of rioting, through the use of confrontational and polemic language ("...the enraged wave of resistance that craves for counterattack and VICTORY!", user, IMC Athens, 8.12). In these posts, most users explicitly or implicitly stressed the targeted and symbolic characters of these acts, that were directed at police departments, banks and public buildings and not at small shops, aiming to counter the frame of "blind violence":

> "The "barbarians", of course, passed by [the] shops but again, in a miraculous way, nearby banks were smashed and set of fire without even a crack in the glass of the commercial shops" (user, IMC Athens, 10.12).

Causal interpretation and moral evaluation

But what was the reason of this *uprising* (causal interpretation) and what kind of moral evaluations were put forth? Almost all posts agree that the killing of the young student was actually a *murder*. However, it was only a triggering event, not the actual cause of the protests. Although 35% of the articles do not attempt to provide any explanations, in the rest of the articles three interpretative frames stand out. The most prominent frame is the "systemic causes" frame (present in 77% of interpretative articles), which locates the roots of all socioeconomic problems of Greek people (un- and under-employment and impoverishment) in the neoliberalist policies imposed by their governments:

> "... neo-liberalism is the rampant domination of the poor by the rich, the absolute contempt to the individual and collective human rights, and even

worse, their daemonisation [sic], that constitutes in that they're the reason
of the poverty and abjection, that rule the earth" (user, IMC Athens, 12.12).

Another reason posited is the excessive police repression and brutality, which is attributed to a deliberate governmental strategy towards intensifying restriction of civil rights and freedoms, coupled with the impunity of corrupted politicians and a widespread institutional decay.

In 20% of the interpretative articles, the unprecedented range and rigor of the protests is explained by feelings of rage, disillusionment, despair and lack of hope for the future that are shared by large segments of the young population. In 23% of the articles, posters posit the desire for radical social change as the reason behind the protests, which is often associated with anarchist ideological values and visions of a different social order. In this sense, protesters communicated what Gavriilidis (2009: 19) explains as "an anxiety before the possibility not of *missing* [a certain] life style, but precisely of *getting it*: they declared that this is *not* what they perceive as a meaningful life, and they are not willing to sacrifice all their vital energy in order to achieve it' (emphasis in the original, cited in Vatikiotis, 2011: 169).

Regarding the moral evaluation of the protests, the dominant frame identified is the "no justice, no peace" frame, evident in 63% of all evaluative articles. The inequality and the deep socioeconomic problems, together with the complete lack of faith for granting of justice within institutional procedures, is what justifies the protests and the acts of civil disobedience. Mass participation in protest actions is posited as the only way to resist and counter the attack launched by the state and capital forces against civil, social and human rights. In most articles, the defacement of selected buildings and the attacks against banks and police stations are depicted as symbolic, their meaning is explained and they are usually justified. Criticism against the "equation of material damages and loss of lives" and the portrayal of protests as "blind rage" is a recurrent counterargument to mainstream discourses; the latter are seen as misleading the public to believe that protesters represent a threat for working people and an enemy to society.

Other posters, however, are more dubious and half of the evaluative articles express skepticism regarding the unconditional justification of violent protests. In these posts, posters utter an outright rejection of violence and rioting as means of struggle and denounce non-political vandalism and looting.
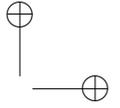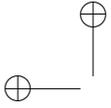
Others express the fear that the situation can no longer be controlled by consciously protesting actors, seeing rioting as the cause of a missed opportunity for a truly mass social uprising to occur that could have made a difference. In the same posts, users express the urgent need for articulation of political claims and the construction of a political programme of social transformation.

Treatment recommendation

Lastly, regarding the recommended actions to resolve the crisis (treatment recommendation), there is rather low support for policy measures that could redress problems: less than half of the articles (48%) put forth claims of *institutional action*, such as the resignation of the government, legal reforms or the punishment of those responsible for the student's death. To the same extent (48% of the articles), posters demand *systemic changes*, such as the disarmament of the police, the abolition of neoliberal economic policies and of a "morally corroded political system". In one out of four articles (26%), *contentious politics and civil disobedience* are mentioned as the preferred course of action. However, the most pronounced course of action (mentioned in 59% of the articles) is the consolidation of a strong *social movement*, through the creation of counter-institutions and the organization of assemblies, discussion forums and demonstrations. In these posts, change is expected to come from the grassroots and a continued struggle for "freedom, dignity and social justice".

Conclusion

This paper has sought to explore the role of alternative media in times of social unrest, focusing on how the widespread Greek protests in December 2008 were covered in the alternative news network Indymedia Athens. An analysis of the content posted in Indymedia Athens during the first crucial eight days of the protests showed that the news network functioned mainly as a space for exchange of information, built up largely by the production of original news that conveyed protesters' own experiences of the actual events. At the same time, it served the coordination of protests, catering for the needs of activists for getting direct action news, but also for strengthening identity and solidarity ties. Further, it functioned as an efficient means for spontaneous and
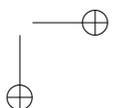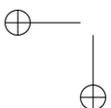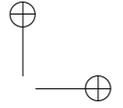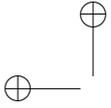
leaderless collective action, offering a mobilization mechanism and a node for building up connections with activists in various Greek cities and abroad.

Yet, as crucial as in-group communication may be in times of social protest, the goal of informing those beyond the faithful and influencing public opinion is equally important for protesting actors, who need to diffuse their messages and secure wider societal support. Besides information and coordination functions, thorough analysis of issues is equally important in order to counterbalance the usual lack of thematic mainstream media coverage and explain activists' positions to concerned audiences.

Indymedia users openly disputed mainstream media frames, contextualized events (offering additional facts) and reframed protests, offering counter-frames (cf. Cooper, 2010: 140). The most prevalent consisted in the designation of protesters as a *movement* that engaged in a political *struggle* of *the people*, an *uprising* of the *oppressed*. Feelings of rage are causally linked to socioeconomic inequalities, restriction of civil rights and freedoms, and political corruption, but also to positive visions of radical social change. Civil disobedience and rioting were contextualized within discourses of systemic criticism of neoliberalism and a morally corroded political system. Top-down solutions were mostly rejected and change was expected to come from the grassroots, through the creation of counter-institutions and a collective struggle for "freedom, dignity and social justice".

Linking the discursive activity developed within this counterpublic sphere to the collective action repertoires identified by Cohen and Arato (1992) in relation to social movements allows us to take a critical distance and assess the role assumed by creators of alternative media spaces in civil society. The findings of the current analysis show that alternative news production served mainly collective actors' "politics of identity", allowing the articulation of individual and collective identities, as well as modes of discourses and interpretations oppositional to the mainstream. What is less clear is the extent to which these communication patterns could serve collective actors' "politics of influence". This inference is based on the fact that, as the majority of posts provided episodic coverage of events, this kind of discourse was present in only a very small segment of Indymedia Athens – at least for the first eight days of the protests. Thus, the thematic discussion of the deeper issues that were at the core of the protests could be easily lost in the vast quantity of factual information, and overshadowed by an image of "civic war". The news
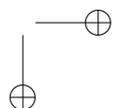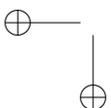
product of "native reporting" and the organization of its discourse – with its partisan and fragmentary character – seemed, at this case at least, unfit for a thorough presentation of activists' causes to the general public – and, at the same time, unlikely to be used as news material for professional journalists.

An important limitation of this study lies in the fact that, as Indymedia content was only a fraction of the countless online grassroots sources about the Greek protests in 2008 in which protesters shared their experiences and constructed different meanings of the December events, its findings cannot be generalized beyond the context of the specific online space. Future studies need to capture a broader range of the numerous and diverse online outlets to investigate their role during protests.

Still, the relative lack of thematic coverage found in this study could limit alternative media's ability to effectively counter dominant discourses, as the communicative power of oppositional voices is limited within partial online spheres, reaching only the audiences who care to look for them. When the public speech of radical protest is turned to a media spectacle and its symbolic language is disfigured, it is crucial that counterinterpretations reach the general public so that they act as "alternative benchmarks" at the level of reception of mainstream discourses. Certainly, more research is needed to test out these assumptions and determine the extent and the ways in which counterpublic spheres online can generate spill-over effects and bring about changes in public opinion in times of social unrest. As a concluding remark, we posit that, as long as alternative media are not entrapped in a "permanent marginality" (Garcelon, 2006: 73), can serve social actors that are vulnerable to systematic exclusion or misrepresentation by mainstream arenas, and, most importantly, contribute to the democratization of the public sphere at large.

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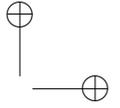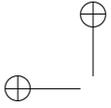
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