Research Note

Alternative Media, Public Journalism and the Pursuit of Democratization

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Although alternative media continue to attract little scholarly attention compared with mainstream media, the past couple of years have witnessed a proliferation of scholarly works, as evidenced by the appearance of five books (i.e. Atton, 2002a; Downing, 2001; Halleck, 2002; Rodriguez, 2001; Streitmatter, 2001) and five journal issues (i.e. Atton, 2003; Cecil, 2000; Gibbs and Hamilton, 2001; Kidd, 2001; Turner, 2002) devoted to the topic. This increase in scholarly attention is timely, if not long overdue, considering the bourgeoning of print and broadcasting-based alternative media and the novel uses to which newer information and communication technologies, notably the internet, are being put by various social movements.

In this brief essay, I discuss the democratic potential of alternative media in contemporary, mass-mediated societies. Following a description of how the authors of the five books mentioned above and other scholars distinguish alternative from mainstream media, I assess the potential of alternative media as agents of societal and media democratization. I examine the democratic significance of alternative media as institutions of the public sphere and outline how mainstream media committed to the "public" or "civic" journalism movement could further their democratic goals by emulating alternative media practices.

Distinguishing Alternative from Mainstream Media

While the sheer number and diversity of alternative media make developing a single, all-encompassing definition of such media difficult, scholarship on alternative media suggests how these are different from mainstream media. Most generally, alternative media could be defined as media devoted to providing representations of issues and events which oppose those offered in the mainstream media and to advocating social and political reform. Although some scholars divide alternative media into "oppositional" and "advocacy" media, depending on which of these goals is most central to their mission (e.g. Evans, 2002; Jacubowicz, 1990; Sholle, 1995), it might be useful to conceive of these as different, but closely related, goals of alternative media. Indeed, in one of the most comprehensive overviews of alternative media to date, Downing (2001, p. 45) shows that such media typically perform dual functions as "counterinformation institutions" and "agents of developmental power". Similarly, Atton (2002a, p. 10) argues, in his discussion of a wide range of UK and US alternative media, notably British environmental anarchist publications, that such media are characterized not only by their critiques of mainstream media, but also by the alternative values and frameworks that underlie their news coverage.

A prominent manifestation of these dual goals is the Independent Media Center (Indymedia), a global network of more than 100 autonomously operated and linked websites, which was established in conjunction with the anti-corporate globalization protests in Seattle in 1999. In her insightful account of a variety of alternative media projects with which she has been personally involved, Halleck (2002, chapter 9) notes that the Indymedia network, which has become one of the most important sites for alternative news and activist mobilization, provides counter-information to that offered by mainstream media on a wide range of issues and events as well as extensive links to activist groups both within and outside the anti-corporate globalization movement.

The example of the Indymedia network directs attention to another, related characteristic of alternative media, namely their close, if not

symbiotic, relationship to social movements; a point that is repeatedly stressed in the scholarly literature on alternative media. In his richly illustrated, historical description of the dissident press in the US, Streitmatter (2001; see also Atton, 2002a, chapter 4; Downing, 2001, chapter 3) shows that alternative media have served as vital conduits for the political agendas of social movements as well as helped ignite social movements through their advocacy of various disenfranchised social groups. Indeed, Streitmatter argues that, besides being the first to articulate and diffuse the agendas of many emerging social movements, alternative media have helped bring those agendas to the attention of governmental institutions and mainstream media.

The commitment on the part of alternative media to providing counter-information to that offered by mainstream media and to advocating social and political reform manifests itself in their organizational structure, news coverage and, not least importantly, the relations between journalists and audiences. Exemplifying what scholars of alternative media variously refer to as a "self-managed" (Downing, 2001), "non-hierarchical" (Atton, 2002a) or "collectivist-democratic" (Hochheimer, 1993) form of organization, alternative news coverage is generally produced by the same people whose concerns it represents, from a position of engagement and direct participation (Traber, 1985). Alternative media aim to include people normally excluded from mainstream media coverage (Atton, 2002a, p. 4), whether by featuring them in news coverage as central actors or by producing content relevant to their everyday lives (Atton, 2002a, p. 11).

One defining characteristic of alternative media is thus the importance attached to providing audiences with "mobilizing information" directed both at external political activism and at participation in news production (Stanfield and Lemert, 1987), or what scholars of alternative media variously refer to as "information for action" (Atton, 2002a), "action on action" (Melucci, 1996) or "useful information" (Whitaker, 1981). In contrast to mainstream media's liberal democratic ideal of the "informed" citizenry, alternative media promote the partici-

patory democratic ideal of the "mobilized" citizenry (Atton, 2002a). Alternative media conceive of themselves as "facilitators of social communication" rather than mere "sources of information" (Tomaselli and Louw, 1990, p. 213).

While many scholars note that one of the primary goals of alternative media is to mobilize citizens and that involvement in alternative media production can be politically empowering for participants (e.g. Atton, 2002a; Downing, 2001; Halleck, 2002; Streitmatter, 2001), few have gone as far as to argue, as King and Mele (1995, p. 605) put it, that "what" is produced is less significant than "how" it is produced. In her detailed case studies of alternative media projects in Columbia, Nicaragua, Spain and the US, Rodriguez (2001, p. 160) makes precisely that argument, concluding that "what is most important about [alternative] media is not what citizens do with them but how participation in these media experiments affect citizens and their communities". Following Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) notion of radical democracy, Rodriguez argues that the significance of alternative media resides less in their ability to impact upon governmental institutions and more in their ability alter individual and group self-perception, challenge oppressing social relations, and thereby enhance participants' own access to power. Thus, in contrast to Atton (2002a), Downing (2001), Halleck (2002) and Streitmatter (2001), who primarily define the democratic significance of alternative media in terms of their ability to affect large-scale social and political reform, Rodriguez (2001) defines the democratic significance of alternative media in terms of their ability to affect the everyday lives of citizens.

An Alternative Public Sphere or a Sphere of Alternative Publics?

Given such alternative goals and practices, and given the differences to mainstream media, how is one to assess the democratic significance of alternative media? One fruitful way of approaching this question is to think of alternative media as institutions of the public sphere and, more precisely, as O'Donnell (2001, p. 41) sug-

gests, to consider whether such media constitute an alternative public sphere or, conversely, a sphere of multiple alternative publics.

As theorized by Habermas (1989), the public sphere represents an ensemble of discursive spaces between civil society and the state where ordinary citizens, either on their own or as representatives of larger social groupings, can debate public issues of concern to them. The debates, which ideally are unconstrained by political and economic elites, are aimed at the formation of public opinion and the shaping of governmental conduct. Within this theoretical framework, alternative media can, as both Atton (2002a, p. 35) and Downing (2001, p. 29) note, usefully be seen to constitute an "alternative" public sphere in explicit opposition to the "official" public sphere of mainstream media with their intimate ties to political and economic elites. Indeed, in contrast to mainstream media, which consistently have been found to exclude the voices of ordinary citizens as well as to trivialize, marginalize and at times even demonize social movements (see Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993; Gitlin, 1980; McLeod and Hertog, 1999), alternative media offer sympathetic venues for ordinary citizens' views. In this respect, the short-lived existence of many alternative media need not necessarily be seen, as the former alternative media research group Comedia (1984, p. 97) suggests, as a sign of a lack of financially viable modes of operation, but rather as a manifestation of what Atton (2002a, p. 50) calls the "mutual" and "synergetic" relationship between alternative media and the alternative public sphere. Alternative media tend to flourish during periods of social and political upheaval, while languishing during periods of relative social and political calm (Streitmatter, 2001, p. 275).

The democratic significance of alternative media resides not only in their efforts to broaden the scope of public debate by introducing topics and participants generally excluded by mainstream media, but also in the modes of discourse applied. In contrast to the Habermasian ideal of rational-critical discourse, alternative media typically allow for a multitude of discourse forms "whose communicative trust", as Downing (2001, p. 52) notes,

"depends not on closely argued logic but on their aesthetically conceived and concentrated force". Similarly, Atton (2002a, p. 15) shows that one of the defining characteristics of alternative media is their experimentation with both the form and content of coverage.

While the notion of an alternative public sphere offers a useful framework for elucidating the democratic significance of alternative media, it is also possible to think of such media as constituting a sphere of multiple alternative publics, or what Sholle (1995) and Urla (1995) refer to as multiple "partial publics". Although alternative media, as Atton (2002a, p. 82) notes, often operate in temporal alliances to achieve specific goals, many such media serve the interests of minute social groups whose particular concerns may or may not overlap with those of other social groups (Avison and Meadows, 2000; Ewart, 2000; Forde et al., 2002). Indeed, both Atton (2002a, p. 156) and Downing (2001, p. 29) invoke Fraser's (1990) widely cited notion of "subaltern counterpublics" to indicate that alternative media represent parallel, and at times overlapping, discursive spaces where participants can debate public issues of particular concern to them.

Conceptualized as a sphere of multiple alternative publics, the democratic significance of alternative media also needs to be assessed in term of their external reach. Following Keane's (1995) three-part typology of "micro" (local), "meso" (regional/national) and "macro" (global) public spheres, it is useful to consider whether particular alternative media are able to reach wider, especially other alternative, publics.

At one end of the spectrum are "micro" public spheres represented by alternative media like public access cable television stations. While such outlets are available to the public on a non-discriminatory basis, operate independently of the editorial control of cable station managers and offer participants opportunities to speak freely on topics of their choice, their democratic significance is compromised by a predominantly local orientation that, among other issues, manifests itself in a lack of access to people residing outside the immediate community, a lack of financial support for distribu-

ting programming among different stations and a resulting lack of ties to broader spheres of public debate (Aufderheide, 1992; Engelman, 1990; Stein, 2003). At the other end of the spectrum, alternative media like the Indymedia network could be seen to represent a "macro" public sphere. The Indymedia network not only offers geographically dispersed participants opportunities to debate issues and events of common concern, but also offers opportunities to collaborate on activist initiatives of a global reach (Eagleton-Pierce, 2001; Kidd, 2003; Montagner, 2001). In between the micro public spheres of public access cable television stations and the macro public sphere of the Indymedia network are "meso" public spheres like that of the Pacifica Radio Network, which produces and distributes programming on a national scale to numerous local radio stations (Barlow, 1988; Klein, 1999; Stavitsky and Gleason, 1994).

Making Journalism More Public

While many scholars have discussed the democratic significance of alternative media as institutions of the public sphere, surprisingly few, as Atton (2002a, p. 152) notes, have considered whether and how alternative media could help democratize mainstream media. Indeed, although several scholars have argued that mainstream media should emulate alternative media practices (e.g. Bruck and Raboy, 1990, p. 14; Streitmatter, 2001, p. 283), few have examined how alternative media practices could be employed by mainstream media (for a notable exception, see Atton [2002b] on *The Guardian*'s use of "native reporting"). Following Atton's (2002b, p. 491) suggestion that such borrowings are most likely to occur among media sharing similar journalistic ideologies, it is useful to consider how mainstream media committed to the "public" or "civic" journalism movement could further their democratic goals by emulating alternative media practices.

Although advocates and practitioners of public journalism, unlike those of alternative media, attempt to reform journalistic practices from within, as opposed to from outside, mainstream media, there are significant similarities between their democratic goals. Most impor-

tantly, like alternative media, news organizations committed to public journalism pursue the overarching goal of increasing citizen participation in democratic processes. This is accomplished, among other ways, by focusing attention on issues of concern to citizens, reporting on those issues from the perspectives of citizens rather than politicians, experts and other elite actors, offering citizens opportunities to articulate and debate their opinions on issues, elaborating on what citizens can do to address those issues, organizing sites for citizen deliberation and action such as roundtables, community forums and local civic organizations, and following up on citizen initiatives through ongoing and sustained coverage (see Charity, 1995; Merritt, 1998; Rosen, 1999).

Despite these similarities, attending to certain differences could help further public journalism's democratic goals. First, and perhaps most importantly, although news organizations practicing public journalism have been involved in various efforts to increase citizen participation in democratic processes, they have generally refrained from promoting particular outcomes. While this position of political neutrality reflects a long-standing demand to distinguish between "doing journalism" and "doing politics" (Rosen, 1999, p. 76), such a position renders news organizations committed to public journalism, unlike alternative media, "incapable of promoting social change" (Glasser, 1999, p. 10). Indeed, as Glasser notes, public journalism's apolitical stance "makes it difficult for journalists to join forces … with any part of the community associated with political or partisan interests … Unwittingly or not, then, public journalism's fear of advocacy isolates the press from the very centers of power that are likely to make a difference locally, regionally, nationally, and even globally" (p. 10). Thus, instead of partnering only with politically benign organizations like non-profit foundations, universities and local civic groups, news organizations practicing public journalism should, like alternative media, join forces with political parties, trade unions, professional associations, local reform movements and other special interest groups.

The problem with public journalism's fear of

advocacy also manifests itself in the kind of mobilizing information provided. While news organizations committed to public journalism, like alternative media, have been found to offer significantly more mobilizing information than mainstream media more generally (see Blazier and Lemert, 2000; McMillan *et al.*, 1998; Miller, 1994), there are good reasons to question the kind of mobilizing information provided. Most importantly, these news organizations typically limit themselves to encouraging citizens to participate in voluntary community interventions (Pauly, 1999, p. 146). This emphasis on voluntary community intervention, however, is likely to create a false sense of participatory involvement which serves entrenched elite interests (Glasser, 1999, p. 10; Parisi, 1997, p. 682) and/or increases public cynicism toward government and politics, the very cynicism public journalism hoped to reduce if not eliminate (Iggers, 1998, p. 150; Schudson, 1999, p. 129). A more constructive approach to citizen participation would be to follow the example of alternative media and advocate measures that correspond to the nature of particular issues under investigation. This would require news organizations to carefully consider whether given issues can be adequately addressed through voluntary community intervention or whether they require intervention of more deep-seated, systemic character as well as to consider whether given issues can be adequately addressed through local intervention, whether citizen-based or systemic, or whether they require intervention of regional, state, national or even international scope (see Haas and Steiner [2003, p. 45] for development).

Relatedly, while several studies have found that news organizations practicing public journalism, like alternative media, include comparatively more citizen sources than mainstream media more generally (see Haas, 2000; Kennamer and South, 2002; Maier and Potter, 2000), these news organizations tend to reproduce conventional divisions of labor between citizens and experts. Most importantly, citizen testimony is often used as a mere backdrop against which experts offer, in conventional top-down fashion, substantive explanations of problem causes and solutions (Massey and Haas, 2002).

A more constructive approach would be to follow the example of alternative media and place citizens and experts on a more equal footing in outlining potential solutions to problems.

Finally, while news organizations committed to public journalism, like alternative media, have been involved in various efforts to challenge conventional, hierarchical journalist–audience relations, such as by offering citizens opportunities to articulate and debate their particular views on given issues, these news organizations have retained the power of journalists to set the media agenda. As such, public journalism represents a "conservative reform movement [in that] it speaks loudly of the public but addresses itself to a professional group without challenging that group's authority" (Schudson, 1999, pp. 118–19). Short of eradicating the distinction between journalists and audiences characteristic of many alternative media, news organizations practicing public journalism could increase the agenda-setting power of citizens by enhancing their public accountability. This could be accomplished in practice, as Schudson (1999, p. 122) notes, by implementing citizen media review boards and national news councils, or require that news organizations be answerable to governmental or community bodies.

Conclusion

The prior discussion attests to the democratic significance of alternative media. While alternative media play vital roles as institutions of the public sphere, whether seen as institutions of a single, alternative public sphere or as institutions of multiple, alternative public spheres, they could potentially inform the practices of reform-oriented news media such as those committed to the "public" or "civic" journalism movement. Future research should consider in more detail the interplay of alternative and mainstream media in articulating and diffusing the agendas of social movements as well as investigate what happens when reform-oriented mainstream media adopt alternative media practices.

Acknowledgements

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