

Alternative Media

The Art of Rebellion

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Scholars and activists frequently debate the role of mass media in society, but it is commonly understood that media contribute to the formation of cultural practices and political opinions, the evolution of journalism and art, the construction of ideologies (collective ideas about the way the world “should” work) and the development of national, regional, and self-identities. Mass media are an integral part of everyday life, but ironically most people are never taught to understand, evaluate or critically analyze the ways that media work. Media education is virtually absent from most public schools in the United States and until recently the phrase “media literacy” was rarely used in connection with primary or secondary education. Slowly but surely, school districts are beginning to incorporate media education into their standard curricula, but most teachers—aside from those trained in communication, film, or cultural studies—have not been taught how to develop effective media literacy programs.

Effective forms of media literacy require people to develop their critical thinking skills, and students are often very surprised (or shocked) when they begin to learn about the intersecting problems between media conglomeration, production, advertising, representation and reception. Sorting through history, misinformation and misconceptions is

a difficult process and doing so can seem overwhelming to even the most educated person. However, critical media studies can be both rewarding and empowering if approached in the right way. The problem is that many educators feel as if the only way to empower students is to overwhelm them with information and statistics about the insurmountable problems related to mass media without adequately discussing the ways in which people either challenge media power or create alternatives to it. Moreover, teachers often fail to understand why students do not *do* anything with this knowledge once they have been “empowered.” The reason why is because teaching media literacy in this manner is not a form of empowerment—it is paralysis.

For any program in critical media literacy/education to be successful, several factors must be present. First of all, students must be willing to develop their critical thinking skills, to engage both their peers and their teachers, and to challenge their own assumptions. Teachers must also be willing to engage in critical dialogue, but they have the additional responsibility of creating an environment that encourages students to learn from one another. Students generally have a vast knowledge of media technologies and media content, and it is important for teachers to help their students utilize such knowledge in the classroom. Most importantly, though, teachers must choose reading materials and topics that address both the problems of mass media as well as some of the viable alternatives to a corporate media model.

In an ideal world, teachers would have the time, resources, and/or freedom necessary to adequately explore media practices that challenge the status quo. However, we all know that the realities of public education in the U.S. are much more grim—students can consider themselves lucky if they attend a district that has adequate funding for books, much less a media literacy curriculum. Nevertheless, teachers who facilitate media literacy programs have a responsibility to expose their students to diverse media content and media practices that are not profit-governed. One of the best ways to achieve such goals is to utilize *alternative media* in the classroom. The study of alternative media can, and should be, incorporated into any media curriculum that aspires to motivate and empower students. In what follows, I will discuss what alternative media are, why people create alternative media, and how alternative media production promotes the ethics of participation and dissent over consumption and passivity.

What Are Alternative Media?

Mass media in the United States have a long history of corporate ownership, from the empire established by newspaper mogul William Randolph Hearst in the 1920s through the contemporary dominance of multinational corporations like Murdoch's News Corporation and Time Warner (Bagdikian 2004, McChesney 2004). The production of alternative media emerged as a response to the problems posed by a profit-driven media system in which only a few corporations (an *oligopoly*) largely determine what types of media will be produced, which topics will be discussed, which forms of expression will be seen/heard, and whose

voices will ultimately be silenced. Alternative media is part of a vibrant spectrum of dissent against consolidated media power (Couldry & Curran 2003) that includes the efforts of media reform groups (who advocate structural change through policy), media watchdog groups (who critique mass media content) and media education organizations (who advocate media literacy). Alternative media could best be defined as non-corporate media that are driven by content, as opposed to profit, and based upon a “Do It Yourself” (DIY) ethic. Political literature, pirate radio, independent record labels, zines, Web zines, “comix” (underground comic books), and blogs are some of the most notable forms of alternative media that differ from mass media in their production, content, and purpose. By appealing to smaller, specialized audiences through a more personal approach to content that is not dependent on corporate advertising, the producers of alternative media can utilize different formats for their own needs, whether one’s goal is to make a hip-hop record or circulate pamphlets on radical feminism. In other words, people have greater control over what types of media they can produce and what their media “say.” This situation is radically different when compared to the corporate model because corporations have almost exclusive control over the content of their media and they largely base their decisions to feature certain types of media on whether they can sell that product to advertisers. Before I go into more depth about specific types of alternative media, it is useful to explain a little more about the context for alternative media and the relationships between production, content, and purpose.

Production, Power, and Content

Media corporations and advertisers are specifically interested in a group that Eileen Meehan (1990) calls the commodity audience—those people in a given media audience who have disposable income or spending money. A perfect example of the role of the commodity audience can be found in television production. With regard to the content of television programming, the executives of a corporation like NBC do not care whether they show an investigative news program, a made-for-TV movie, or a still photo of the *Friends* cast for an hour, as long as they can convince advertisers that the commodity audience will be watching their station at that particular time. Both corporations and advertisers use rating systems to (roughly) determine who is watching, and they then proceed to haggle about the price of advertising time. To put this more simply, the product being bought and sold is the audience’s attention—not the program. Ultimately, the media corporations decide on the content, and the advertisers can influence those decisions based on the prospects of either buying more advertising time or pulling their financial support altogether. While the specific dynamics of the relationship between producers, advertisers, and audience vary between different media industries, the prevailing norm in corporate media is based upon the strategy of making money . . . lots and lots of money.

Although there are some exceptions to the rule, people who make alternative media do so in a much different way, meaning that they do not have to work within a rigid hier-

archical (top-down) system, and they have the ability to largely determine what is made, how much it will cost, and where it will be available. More importantly, their purpose for making media is not profit-motivated. People sometimes confuse the idea of profit vs. profit-motivated, and it is an important distinction to keep in mind when considering how alternative media are different from corporate media. Profit is not necessarily bad because it is an important way to generate money for new media projects and to reimburse people for their energy, time, and/or services. For example, some alternative media companies, such as independent record labels, may seem like smaller or scaled-down versions of corporate record labels because they have small staffs of paid employees and they advertise their products. However, there are important differences with regard to content, creative control, profit distribution, decision-making and ownership that distinguish these companies from their corporate counterparts. Generally speaking, independent recording artists are not expected to sacrifice creative control, or to compromise their artistic expression, in the name of profit.

Media corporations not only exercise power by controlling the content of their media, they also exert power by restricting access to anyone who is not part of their system. We are led to believe that the media industry is a free market, where anyone can take part, but unless a person has millions of dollars and/or access to satellites, studios, airwaves, or distribution networks, he or she cannot broadcast or circulate his or her chosen medium through corporate channels, never mind having the chance to directly compete with them. In other words, there are extremely high financial and technological barriers to entering the corporate media system. In light of this situation, it is easy to see how production, power and content are interrelated, and why these circumstances are loathed by people who view media as a means of creative expression, a form of education, and/or a vital component of a democratic society.

DIY Media

While it is true that most people lack the financial and technological means to take part in the corporate media system, it is a mistake to think that people who make alternative media want to be part of that system in the first place. Most alternative media producers are strongly opposed to the corporate model, and many hate everything it represents. However, this may not be the primary focus of one's work, or the reason why one makes media in the first place. People create media for a number of different, equally important reasons that should be acknowledged and respected.

One of the most basic reasons why a person creates alternative media is because there are no forms of media available that address one's interests, or represent them in any way. For example, science fiction fans in the 1930s created their own publications called "fanzines," or "zines," in order to write about their favorite sci-fi authors, to review books and films, and to debate issues in science fiction. Science fiction zines also included contributors' contact information so that zine readers could exchange letters, books and writing with one other. At the time there were no publications available that interested hardcore sci-fi fans, so they started their own! By including their contact information, they

used fanzines such as *The Comet* (the original fanzine) to create a grassroots community of science fiction fans. The basic model of the zine was widely popularized in the 1970s through the circulation of punk zines like *Sniffin' Glue* and *Punk*. Like their sci-fi predecessors, punk zines featured interviews, editorial columns, reviews and news about a subculture that was generally ignored by mainstream print media. Since the 1970s, people have made zines about thousands of other topics or issues including thrift store shopping, bicycling, feminism, "temp" work, soccer, celebrity murders, ferrets, afros, queer culture, and just about anything else you could think of (in addition to lots of things you would have never thought of).

The "lo-fi" approach to media production embodied in the cheap, photocopied format of the zine is certainly one way in which individuals have learned how to develop their own voices in an environment of mass produced media, but zines are merely one part of a wider DIY movement against corporate media that is manifested through the independent production of nearly every type of medium including books, film, photography, music, posters, radio programs, and Web sites. Through the use of techniques that range from wheat pasting to html coding, alternative media enthusiasts have not only learned how to use a variety of tools to get out their messages, they have also pushed the creative and artistic boundaries of their respective mediums. For example, some of the most innovative and passionate music to emerge throughout the last 30 years was created by artists who either started their own record labels or worked with independent labels that were founded and operated by other musicians. Despite the fact that media corporations have been actively purchasing entire independent music labels or parts of labels that once played a key role in the production of anti-corporate music (such as Rawkus, Sup Pop, Matador) there are thriving independent music scenes throughout the world that are buttressed by the fiercely anti-corporate ethics of labels like Rough Trade, SST, Warp, Dischord, Anticon, K Records, Definitive Jux, No Idea, Ninja Tune, Constellation, Plan-it-X, and the list goes on and on and on.

My point here is not to privilege music above other forms of alternative media, but merely to provide a basic example of how artistic expression is often fostered in non-corporate environments. The DIY response to mass media production has been, and continues to be, shared by millions of people who create media to represent and address their own specific interests. Participation is the key ingredient to alternative media, which makes it fundamentally different from media models in which producers are seen as separate from audiences. Stephen Duncombe, a professor and political activist, suggests that people who make alternative media erode the lines between producer and consumer and they "challenge the dichotomy between active creator and passive spectator that characterizes our culture and society" (1999, p. 127).

With the development of the Internet and digital publishing technologies, the DIY ethic of participation has not only been more visible to wider audiences, it has also resulted in the creation of interactive forums by groups of eager media producers who work outside of, or directly against, corporate media channels. A perfect example of a participatory, Web-based alternative medium is the online news Web site, Indymedia.org, which was started by activists who wanted to document the events of the 1999 World Trade Organization

protest in Seattle. In the years since the WTO protest, there have been Indymedia Web sites developed in almost 200 cities throughout the world, and people have used the interactive resource as a way to cover news stories, debate political issues, publish investigative journalism, and organize activists for protests on a wide range of political issues.

The DIY approach to media production does not solve socioeconomic problems, but it promotes the idea that anyone can learn how to make their own media. In this way, DIY ethics cross race, class, and gender lines and connect different alternative media practices throughout history. However, there are crucial differences to consider when looking at why or how people end up "doing it themselves." For example, white people have an incredible degree of privilege compared to people of color, so it is wrong to suggest that white suburban teenagers who put out political punk records in the twenty-first century are the same as African American abolitionists who printed their own newspapers in the nineteenth century. There are *worlds* of difference between these two groups including their respective historical/cultural contexts, their motivations, and their access to money, materials and volunteer labor. In addition, there are obvious differences in the actual content of their messages, i.e. what is being said and how it is being said. However, the bond that connects these different groups is a mutual recognition that people must create their own media outlets when none exist—because corporations are certainly not going to do it for us. Media scholar Chris Atton sums this up when he says that alternative media offer "the means for democratic communication to people who are normally excluded from media production" (2002, p. 4).

Radical Media

One of the most important reasons why people make alternative media is because they want to express opinions and views that are too critical, confrontational, and/or political for mass media. Media scholar John Downing (2000) refers to this lineage of media production as *radical media* or media that express an oppositional stance against both mainstream society and popular culture. Radical media have a long history in western countries where people had early access to printing press technologies and opposition to radical media is just as old. For example, the English government passed a large tax on newspapers in 1797 in order to put limits on the radical press. Despite the historical power wielded by governments, churches, and multinational corporations, radical media have continued to thrive through the production of newspapers, pamphlets, posters, music, zines, documentaries, films, Web sites, and blogs that challenge the politics, ethics, and logic of the status quo. Radical media have played an especially important role in labor struggles and social movement activism throughout the last 150 years because they have been a way for disenfranchised and oppressed peoples to articulate their experiences, grievances, and perspectives that are consistently ignored, or grossly misrepresented, by the mass media.

Mass media, particularly news, have a powerful agenda setting function, which means that the media do not necessarily tell us what to think, but they give us an extremely limited option for "what to think about and how to think about it" (McChesney 2004, p. 70).

Through this process of coercion (toward a particular set of beliefs) and consent (people's willingness to embrace mass media) a dominant, or hegemonic, paradigm evolves in a given society and ideas that challenge the dominant ideology are viewed with skepticism, anger, or outright hostility. Radical media, in the form of propaganda (intentionally persuasive information) and journalism (reporting about facts and events with a more "objective" approach) directly challenge this model by introducing new ideas into public discourse, by critiquing institutions of power, by documenting cultures that exist under the radar of popular/consumer culture, by promoting participation, and by encouraging solidarity with others who have similar beliefs about how the world should work.

For the millions who do not benefit from capitalism, consumerism, globalization, and concentrated governmental authority, radical media create spaces where people can both discuss and demand alternatives to prevailing socioeconomic and cultural norms. Some notable examples of radical media in this vein are newspapers and pamphlets produced by groups like the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (The Black Panthers). The IWW began as an anarchist/socialist union that argued for the political organization of all working people into "one big union" that could overthrow the wage system through direct action, i.e., strikes, boycotts, and various forms of civil disobedience. At its height in the early 1900s, the IWW had over 100,000 members who were dedicated to the idea that "an injury to one is an injury to all." Publications like *The Industrial Worker*, the IWW newspaper, were used to keep members informed and educated about relevant news, events, and opinions of fellow workers throughout the country.

A similar example of radical media used in support of a political party can be found in the organization of the Black Panthers, a civil rights and self-defense organization started in 1966 by African American activists who spoke out openly against police violence, capitalism, and centuries of racism against black people. The group's principles were laid out in a document called the "Ten Point Program," which was widely circulated in black communities throughout the United States. Along with the oratory skills of their leadership and the development of successful community programs, the Panthers' literature played an important role in the development of black consciousness in the United States, and it aided in the recruitment of new party members during the late 1960s. In addition to the "Ten Point Program," the Panthers published books, newspapers (*The Black Panther*), and various educational pamphlets about community resources, constitutional rights, and the dangers of drug abuse (to name a few topics).

Activists in recent decades have become more media-savvy by studying both the victories and defeats of media campaigns waged by social movements of previous eras. Their efforts have not only resulted in the production and distribution of radical media throughout the world, they have helped to organize activists involved in the environmental movement, the animal rights movement, the anti-globalization movement, the queer rights movement and the anti-war movement. Radical media has been globally utilized by a diverse wave of activists that range from peasant revolutionaries in Mexico to urban anarchists in the U.K., to peace activists in the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territories.

Creating Networks

The production of alternative media is not just about the creation of media texts, it is also about creating a shared sense of community with people who have similar views, interests and beliefs. This is one of the reasons why alternative media has played such a central role in political organizations and subcultures throughout the world. As new forms of media emerge, new channels of communication open up, new communities develop, and the cycle continues. With the added advantage of Web-based communication, the once-small network of alternative media producers, distributors and retailers has grown enormously in recent decades. As a result, it is easier than ever for media producers to gain access to basic materials and distribution networks, assuming that one has the financial means to do so.

Distribution and sales networks are crucial to alternative media production because it is very difficult for people to find places where they can sell media that might be considered "weird," foreign or overtly political. The emergence of giant media retailers (chain stores) and the subsequent closure of "mom and pop" establishments across North America has resulted in fewer stores that are willing to acquire and sell media that are not shipped from a corporate distributor. This also means that fewer stores are willing to support local musicians, writers, artists, and other media producers. Fortunately, there have been diligent media enthusiasts and activists who have devoted incredible amounts of energy to the circulation and distribution of alternative media—oftentimes without being paid. For example, it is not uncommon to see tables set up at DIY punk and/or hip-hop shows where people have boxes of records and CDs for sale from bands whose music will never see the light of day in a Best Buy, Wal-Mart, or Virgin Megastore. At some of the same shows, you will often see touring bands selling music, books, or art from their friends and fellow artists in their hometowns. These types of alternative media distribution networks are often intentionally small and therefore very personal. However, there are certain cases in which these same networks can expand into larger organizations that subsequently help out other independent publishers and distributors.

A case in point is AK Press, a worker-owned collective that publishes political literature and distributes what might be the biggest selection of radical media in the world. AK Press was founded by Ramses Kanaan, an anarchist zine editor who started his distribution network in Scotland. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, Ramses sold political zines while he was on tour with punk bands in Europe, and in 1991 AK Press was turned into a worker-owned cooperative (Vale 1996, p. 106). In recent years, AK has published new books, reprinted older and/or "out of print" books and widened their distribution list to include clothing, buttons, CDs, films, magazines, hundreds of zines and thousands of books—including the entire catalogues of over a dozen independent book publishers/distributors. Through this network, AK Press is not only able to make political literature more widely available, they are also able to help develop and strengthen other alternative media networks that include activists, writers, artists, radical bookstores and "infoshops" (small, volunteer-run collectives that sell and distribute political media). By creating successful, self-sufficient distribution networks, organizations like AK provide vital outlets for people

who would otherwise have no substantial means to sell and/or distribute their work. This not only allows alternative media producers to reach new audiences, it also supports people who want to take artistic/political chances with their media.

Conclusion

While I have only been able to provide a (very) brief glimpse into the world of alternative media, it is easy to see how there are viable options that exist for people who want to create alternative media and others who want access to such resources. Given the vast scope of media produced under the alternative rubric, it is crucial for media scholars, teachers, and students to recognize the ways in which alternative media can enhance, redefine, and challenge our engagement with media in the twenty-first century. Similarly, it is also important to contextualize alternative media as part of a wider resistance movement against corporate power structures that will not save the media on their own account. It is ignorant to dismiss alternative media as a "fringe" activity, but it is also foolish to credit alternative media as being implicitly revolutionary. Alternative media certainly have a distinct role to play in revolutionary politics, and they also have the potential to revolutionize the way in which media are made throughout the world. However, we must not be content with the idea of simply creating alternatives to a commercial, corporate media system that excludes dissent, discourages participation, and negatively represents both the interests and beliefs of billions throughout the world. What we need is more organization among media critics, more pressure applied to corporate media producers, more support for media reform groups, more dialogue, and more media education.

Alternative media teaches us that anyone who wants to make media can do it on their own terms. It teaches us that media production does not require a vast knowledge of media institutions or a great deal of money. It can inform us about a vast array of perspectives on politics, culture, economics and the media industry. Finally, alternative media emphasizes the idea that culture is a "whole way of life" (Williams 1953, p. viii) defined by creation and participation—culture is not simply a product to be consumed.

Learn. Create. Participate. Resist.

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INTERNET RESOURCES

*AK Press (www.akpress.com)

*Democracy Now! (www.democracynow.org)

*International Progressive Publications Network (www.ippn.ws/)

*Microcosm Publishing (www.microcosmpublishing.com)

*The Zine and E-zine Resource Guide (www.zinebook.com)