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Conception and Execution: Critical Knowledge and its Construction in Alternative and Autonomous Media

Cover Page Footnote

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D E M O C R A T I C C O M M U N I Q U É

Conception and Execution: Critical Knowledge and its Construction in Alternative and Autonomous Media

Robert Bertuzzi

Recent investigations of the alternative media landscape have mapped a variegated field of practices, theoretical orientations, forms and content. Amidst this pluralistic flourishing, Marxian influences remain central to several such projects. This paper examines two specific variants of these Marxian-informed media projects. Proponents of the first advocate for the provision of object content that is critical in alternative outlets in response to the political economy of corporate news media. In the second, exponents ostensibly privilege form over content as a means to develop the critical subjectivities of participants in a project of micro social formations. The aim here is to bring these divergent strands of thought and action into conversation with one another. In doing so, what is expressed is an overlooked element of Marx's oeuvre; one that proffers a praxis fusing key features of the critical and autonomous media traditions into something with newfound potentialities.

Keywords: Alternative media, autonomous media, Marx, labour process, medium, epistemology, counter-hegemony.

Within liberal democracies, news media are to provide a form of public pedagogy to facilitate audiences' ability to orient as citizens. However, in-depth investigations over multiple decades show an inability by corporate news media to fulfil this ascribed role, especially as media ownership has become more concentrated (Gibbs 2003). This set of observed shortcomings has engendered a now sustained recognition of the importance of countervailing media projects (ibid). The growing interest in alternative media undertakings has seen investigators develop a multiplicity of terms to describe projects whose differences, while subtle, do capture a wide range of practices and political commitments. In an effort to bring greater clarity to this field of inquiry, Sandra Jeppesen (2016) has developed a typology of alternative media projects. She classifies them into four categories: 1) Do-it-Yourself (DIY) media and culture; 2) community and citizen media; 3) critical media; 4) autonomous and radical media.

For Jeppesen (2016), the category of critical media has its origins in different schools of Marxian analysis, spanning from the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory to critical political economic thought. Contrastively, she traces the lineage of autonomous and radical media to anarchist principles with contributions as well from social movement theory and feminist intersectional theory (ibid). Yet the reference to autonomy also encapsulates the tradition of Autonomist Marxism and its intersections with anarchist praxis (Taylor 2013a). Here, autonomy refers to the self-organizing efforts of working peoples in spaces not given over to value generation and the expansion of capital (de Peuter and Cohen 2015). In less pluralist fashion than Jeppesen (2016), Scott Uzelman (2005) draws categorical distinction between what he identifies as alternative and autonomous media projects. In regards to alternative media, its status is defined in relation to the output of commercial, mainstream media. Any success in reforming or even displacing corporate news media will depend on the formation of a robust alternative media ecosystem. The function of which will be to help constitute a critically informed citizenry. Uzelman (2011) refers to critical media undertakings of this nature as engaging in a "politics of the truth." Conversely, autonomous media "seek to bypass mainstream media (and attempts at reformation) by fostering new forms of participatory and democratic communication" (Uzelman 2005, 17). Such efforts comprise what he calls a "politics of participation" (Uzelman 2011).

Because Marxian theory has not been historically singular, successive generations have selected, combined, and reformulated certain aspects of his thought. This has led to frequent divides (Dyer-Witford 1999), including, in this instance, those involving alternative and autonomous media projects and their respective Marxian influences. Alternative media conceived of in this tradition has emphasized critical theory and critical content in service to rationality, cognition, and consciousness (Fuchs 2010). Therefore, subjectivity resides, primarily, in an epistemology of the symbolic and ideal in which counter-hegemonic information is sufficient in fostering political activity (Uzelman 2011). While such a model conceives of subjective knowledge formation in an explicit fashion, it falls prey to what Karl Marx (1964) identifies as a deficiency in an earlier materialism that engaged with objective reality only as a subjective thought exercise. By comparison, autonomous media projects emphasize the affective and dialogical elements of subjectivity, within participatory organizational forms as a means of cultivating changed social relations at the micro-political level (Uzelman 2011). This includes a privileging of practical activity over abstract knowledge but without regard for the full implications of material activity (Grubic 2013). In what follows, then, I examine a potential synthesis involving a Marxian praxis that combines ideal and material understandings of knowledge as they are embedded in the practices and aims of alternative and autonomous media projects at present. The aim of which is to contribute towards re-envisioning just what a critical education of an alternative kind may look like.

Alternative to What? A Critique of the Political Economy of News Media

Media have served as a potential threat to institutional authority since the inception of the printing press in the mid-1400s. Roughly a century after its invention, a proto-alternative press arises in England and

across continental Europe (Harcup 2003). Some 400 years later, historians view the proliferation of alternative media in the 1950s and 1960s as an outgrowth of growing disenchantment with mainstream American culture. By the end of the 1960s, the United States has approximately 400 alternative publications with a paid circulation of some five million readers (Benson 2003). In the United Kingdom, similarly themed publications debuted in the early 1960s. By the early 1970s, members of a British Royal Commission conclude this flowering of alternative media is a response to “respectable publications” and their unwillingness or inability to put forth a diverse range of views and representations (Harcup 2003).

What alternative media projects have shared in common, historically, is a commitment to addressing information asymmetries by detailing, exposing, and uncovering ways in which institutions, and their actors, operate to maintain, and reinforce, the advantages of power, including definitional power in the symbolic field (Downing et al 2001). This requires “providing access to alternative voices, alternative arguments, alternative sets of ‘facts,’ and alternative ways of seeing, all of which citizens may... use to engage critically with the output of mainstream media” (Harcup 2003, 371). Such asymmetries arise as a minority group with ownership over the means of public pedagogy is able to disseminate ideas favourable to the maintenance of the dominant set of arrangements and relations. In their oft-cited dictum, Marx and Friedrich Engels (1964) write that the “class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control, at the same time, over the means of mental production” (80). In its most reductive economism, interpretation of Marx and Engels’s (1964) formulation proffers a direct determinative effect between capitalist’s organization of production and the beliefs, values, and ideas that dominate during any particular juncture. This occurs, in part, via the distribution of news texts, and the dominant ideologies encoded within them (Williams 2003).

In spite of subsequent theorizations viewing dominant interests and subordinate classes, including the audience-text interface, as more of a contested social terrain, Marx and Engels’s (1964) early observation continues to underpin critical political economy of communication investigations. Specific to this is concern with power inequities embedded in the production, distribution, and consumption of commodity media texts, and their contribution to the “ideological moments of social life” (Mosco 1996, 29). Robert McChesney (2000) describes Marxian political economy of communication as interrogating how news media “are controlled, structured and subsidized,” and what the effects of these circumstances are upon democratic discourses and political outcomes (7). David Hesmondhalgh (2002) nominates the Schiller-McChesney tradition as an important exponent of this type of political-economic investigation. This refers to the respective research programs of Herbert Schiller and the aforementioned Robert McChesney.

Normative to McChesney’s (2000, 2008, 2013) studies is an emphasis on news media fulfilling the institutional role assigned it in democratic theory, and the contradictions engendered by a democratic polity situated alongside a capitalist system of mass communication. The further integration of information with entertainment within news media, in a circuit of deepening commodification, has corroded the public service mission of journalism. Alongside this, the imperatives of advertisers have encroached on editorial decision making as well (McChesney 2013). All told, this “hyper-commercialism and denigration of journalism... is a poison ill for democracy” (McChesney 2008, 427). Prescriptive to the vision McChesney (2000) has for news media reform is the founding of alternative media outlets, consisting of non-commercial and non-profit entities.

Schiller’s (1973, 1989, 1998) scholarly output has a broader interest in the transmitted output of the media system in its totality, not just its news adjunct. For instance, in his view, the more non-ideological entertainment programming appears, the more embedded particular cultural assumptions are within those texts: “Entertainment programs give audiences cues as to what is valued in our society and how to behave. They’re really forms of education, of indoctrination” (Schiller 1973, 99). Another key thematic in his work regards how the cultural industries, and the U.S. state, combine to further the project of American imperialism under the “free flow of information” doctrine (Schiller 1998, 24). In a final assessment, and

one closely echoing that of Marx and Engels (1964), Schiller (1973) writes, the “means of manipulation are many, but, clearly, control of the informational and ideational apparatus at all levels is essential” (4).

The most well-known purveyors of this school of political economic critique are Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky (2002). In their presentation, the media system, and in particular, news media, operate in functionalist fashion to interpellate individuals into the *status quo* by inculcating “values, beliefs, and codes of behaviour that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society” (Herman and Chomsky 2002, 1). To try and account for how this occurs, the authors develop what they term a propaganda model comprised of five filters. The most important determinants in this paradigm are the concentrated ownership of news media outlets, the profit orientation of these enterprises, the aggregate power of this ownership class, and the reliance upon advertising revenues to fund these operations.

The propaganda model proves itself as a central framework for researchers investigating the political economy of news media. For instance, around the turn of the millennium, Canadian news media undergoes a period of further consolidation. Simultaneous to this, investigators catalogue multiple events involving direct management interference in the editorial decisions of news media workers within these concentrated enterprises (Edge 2007, Hackett et al 2000, Klaehn 2005, Taras 2001, Winter 2007). Much interpretive power is directed at understanding these episodes through the prism of the propaganda model (Hackett et al 2000). The “media’s performance, then, is understood as an outcome of market forces” by which a small-owning faction attempts to ensure the universalization of its ideas (Herman and Chomsky cited in Klaehn 2005, 223). These instances provide additional empirical support for Marx and Engels’s (1964) initial insight. And the research interrogating these episodes shows that this precept has served as a foundation for a great deal of subsequent theory building. In sum, it is the political economic structure of the capitalist news media that engenders a need for an antithetical force: “(T)he first step involves educating the public ... (by) the alternative media. In this way, we may begin to challenge the true power of the corporate media—their ability to set the agenda for discussion ... and ... to influence our very consciousness” (Winter 1992, 263).

Alternative Media as Marxian Critical Media

A political economic analysis of news media indebted to Marxian thought provides an account of why alternative media are necessary. But until now, it has not examined in detail the function of a Marxian alternative media. In Jeppesen’s (2016) typology, she cites the scholarship of Christian Fuchs as detailing the character of a Marxian alternative media. For Fuchs (2010) and Marisol Sandoval, the most important attribute of alternative media projects is the presentation of critical content. In their view, this is a corrective to a “politics of participation,” and the primacy given to procedures and organizational form (Andersson 2012). The critical content of a Marxian-inspired alternative media can challenge “human consciousness so that imagination is potentially advanced and suppressed possibilities of development can potentially be imagined (Fuchs 2010, 181). The formation of a radical imagination, premised on the provision of critical content, is the basis of a critical theory for alternative media that can envision a reality beyond capitalism (Andersson 2012). For this to occur, new ways of understanding emerging from the critical content of alternative media need to be harnessed toward the creation and maintenance of counter-hegemonic, counter-public spheres (ibid).

A critical theory of alternative media therefore situates itself, at least partially, in the research program of Jurgen Habermas (1989). His work historicizes the development and transformation of the concept of the public sphere. To summarize, the bourgeois revolutions of the eighteenth century see the formation of a liberal civil society predicated on the private autonomy of individuals. This is counterposed to a public functioning of the state. Between these two realms there emerges a constructed sphere of private individuals engaged in public will formation (ibid). In this ideal theorization, the public sphere is reliant on news media to publicize matters of potential interest (Calhoun 1992). Debates ensuing from the

practice of privately informing oneself about the issues publicized occur via “rational-critical debate” (Habermas 1989). Therefore, the general will of this public is arrived at discursively in deliberation. What emerges from these debates is a democratically formed public opinion. This is in direct contrast to the dominant features at present in which consent is manufactured from the commanding heights of the communication and information system (Calhoun 1992). Because of the distance from the Habermasian ideal outlined, notions surrounding counter-public spheres gain prominence. Under this scenario, events and topics alternative media publicize can serve to seed counter-hegemonic undertakings (Downey and Fenton 2003).

Hegemony refers to a process by which a particular social group ascends to a position of authority and leadership during any historical juncture (Gramsci 1971). Dominant ideological presuppositions are the content of any particular hegemonic order, and the struggle for ideological dominance remains continuously provisional. As a result, what is central to the construction of a hegemonic bloc is the organization and management of discourses across public and private institutions. Schools, churches, and media are loci for the transmission of these discourses. Unlike a crude rendering of Marx and Engels’s (1964) dominant ideology thesis, the ruling classes are unable to imbue subordinate classes with their preferred understandings in any directly causal or simple manner. Rather, even the field of the mainstream news media is contested terrain in which consent must be secured (Williams 2003). Yet in moments of seeming hegemonic stability, certain life practices and accompanying conceptualizations share a breadth and a depth of reach that seems to suffuse all aspects of social, cultural, political, and economic life (Louw 2002). It is this naturalization of ‘common sense,’ during such periods, that gives the appearance of immutability to hegemonic blocs (Smucker 2017).

Counter-hegemonic challenges to the dominant (symbolic) order, in terms of who wields definitional power are an intervention seeking to destabilize prevalent meanings, their framings, and the ‘common sense’ that ensues. At least part of the premise and promise of alternative media as suppliers of critical content is that these outlets will publicize matters of import in a Habermasian sense. Yet Habermas does not theorize how the public sphere could be a site of organization, struggle and transformation (Kellner 2000). Deliberation in the public sphere limits itself to legitimating or delegitimizing bodies of democratic decision-making. The public sphere thereby functions to publicize matters of import to the political sphere, which can then act on these issues (ibid). This model therefore appears to exhibit a lacuna between the discursive activity of the citizenry and the actual exercise of political power in legislative bodies.

Still, Sandoval and Fuchs (2010) stress the importance of critical theory informing understandings of alternative media practices. Again, this is to serve as a rebuke to the participatory turn in such theorizations. Media projects rooted in a participatory ethos are unable to scale to a sufficient size in the creation of counter-public spheres. The fragmented landscape that results vitiates the possibility of constructing transformative social movements (ibid). Yet, at the same time, this exhaustive concern with texts and discourses, and their importance to critical knowledge formation, has its own deficiencies. Primarily, it has come at the expense of a detailed consideration of the processes involved in text construction. Subsequently, what follows, is an exploration of the epistemological possibilities that inhere in the labour processes of media makers. Prior to this, it is first necessary to look at the forces shaping autonomous (media) projects.

Mediatopias: Experiments in Autonomism and Anarchism

The critical approaches examined in the previous sections conceptualize alternative media as one counter-hegemonic component in a transformative political project. By comparison, theorizations regarding autonomous media projects situate such endeavours as part of a prefigurative political undertaking (Kozolanka, Mazepa, and Skinner 2012). Conceptually, the notion of prefigurative politics mirrors the

anarchist maxim of trying to build a new society from inside the shell of the old one (Graeber 2002). Rather than waiting for a political revolution, which may never arrive, and which involves replacing one hegemonic group with another, a social revolution can be enacted in “futures-present” experiments, altering social relations on an interpersonal and micro-level (Shantz 2009). The importance assigned to subjective elements in social relation formation does not entail the transformation or reformation of the state apparatus. Instead, it wishes to bypass it by operating non-hegemonically: “The aim is ... not to be counter-power or counter-hegemony. Rather, it is to generate forms of autonomous, political interaction and intensity” (Newman 2016, 32). For Brian Holmes (2013), the primary product of such undertakings is the creation of the group in its affective and collaborative impulses, and the subjectivities required for this in overcoming the figure of the monad in liberal political theory. Concern here is with an ongoing process of collective becoming as subjectivity and sociality are remade through acts of affinity (Day 2005).

The contestation colloquially known as the “Battle in Seattle” is illustrative of the growing interest in, and influence of, anarchist and Autonomist Marxist praxis in social movements (Clough and Blumberg 2012). The writings of Chris Carlsson (2008) are but one example of the intersectionality between anarchist and Autonomist Marxist thought. He deems the ensemble of related projects organized around the principles of autonomism and anarchism as “nowtopian.” Autonomous media projects themselves fall within the categorization of “nowtopian” formations. What distinguishes them from alternative media outlets is that they “cannot simply ... enable needed debate, (and) expose hidden operations of the power structure ... They also need to be organized in ways that promote developmental power within their own ranks, that develop participation in all decisions by historically excluded groups” (Downing et al 2001, 72). The development of potentialities for collective self-governance is constitutive of a constellation of activities shaping class formation in ways hostile to capital (Carlsson 2008). An instantiation of this set of outlooks can be found in pirate-radio parties held in the Parkdale neighbourhood in Toronto, Ontario. Party founders note a main aim of their undertaking is to have members of the immediate community come to the broadcast location, and to get behind the microphone in order to reduce barriers to participation—including financial obstacles and the need for expert training (Sakolsky et al 2010). Transformations in audience relations, wishes to flatten social hierarchies, and the deployment of a division of labour that eschews professionalism are differences distinguishing alternative media from autonomous media (Uzelman 2011).

The creation of these types of temporary autonomous zones lends itself to inclusivity and participation as distinctions between audience and broadcast professional undergo a posited erasure (ibid). This can contribute to participant-listeners re-envisioning possibilities of how broader social structures might be organized. At the very least, it may allow people to realize new types of freedom, that again, are not dependent on political revolution (Day 2005). Across autonomous media projects there is an exhibited commitment to freedom with a basis in egalitarianism, anti-authoritarianism, participatory democracy, and skill sharing as an epistemological foundation (Pickard 2006, Pickerill 2007, Sakolsky et al 2010, and Jeppesen et al 2014). But Blair Taylor (2013a) argues the organizational form autonomous (media) projects adopt inhibits the development of substantive content. What transpires is that the construction of explicit political and ideological positions that assume secondary importance vis-a-vis the immediate temporal needs of maintaining the viability of the project. Criticism of micro-community media projects, which wish to change social relations from below, targets their ostensible disdain for the complex, abstract, mediated and universal. This leaves Fuchs (2010) to conclude autonomous media projects favour process and organization over form and content and in doing so, ghettoize themselves.

However, at least some autonomous media projects appear to occupy a hybrid position between critical content delivery, and a realization of the affects required to formulate and sustain more participatory structures. In Media Co-op outlets located in the Canadian cities of Halifax, Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver, Scott Uzelman (2012) detects a co-determining character to these operations. Critical reporting from the vantage point of communities and groups normally marginalized in commercial news

media joins with organic content creation procedures along with governance structures that facilitate the active involvement of the membership in decision-making. Even prior to this, Independent Media Centres were pursuing a two-pronged strategy of exposing the underlying agenda of corporate globalization through the provision of critical reportage while also organizing these outlets in ways that would challenge the logic of globalization (Pickard 2006 and Pickerill 2007).

Co-Determination: The Dialectic of the Labour Process

Attention now turns to examining the labour process in general terms. In Marx's (1977) investigation of the labour process, he identifies a tension between the universal necessity for human intercourse with nature to meet needs, and the particular qualities such activities take in a given historical period. But "in its simple and abstract qualities" (290), the labour process consists of the ability of humans to engage in "purposeful activity" (284), the ability to act upon an object for the purposes of transforming it into a different object meeting a need, and lastly, the mediating role tools/technologies occupy between the subject and object of human activity and the natural environment respectively. In less anthropological, more contemporary terms, the labour process refers to the terrain of control between labour and capital vis-à-vis technologies utilized in the workplace, the overall configuration of work processes, the organization of relations between workers and management and between workers themselves (Yates 2018).

A near one-hundred year period elapses after Marx's death before Harry Braverman (1998) re-establishes Marxian interest in the labour process in the mid-1970s. He demonstrates in great empirical detail how conception, the ability of humans to imagine fabrication in their minds via language, is sundered from execution, the forging of the object by tool and hand, over the course of the twentieth century. The capitalist fragmentation and rationalization of labour processes equates with the de-skilling of (craft) workers. In Braverman's (1998) estimation, Frederick W. Taylor's program of "scientific management" remains as "the most decisive single step ... taken by the capitalist mode of production" in furthering the development of the detailed division of labour through the "separation of (the) hand and brain" (87). But even prior to the erosion of craft skills in the previous century, there is a realization dating to the Hellenic period that work is a detriment to wellbeing when "one man (*sic*) executes the thought of another" (Murphy 1993, 8).

Such fears became amplified during the Industrial Revolution. Figures as seemingly disparate as Adam Smith (1991) and Marx (1988) see the emerging division of labour as deleterious to humans' intellectual faculties. This concern extends into the present. Thomas Dunk's (1991) ethnography of blue-collar workers notes that the labour processes within which workers find themselves enmeshed contribute in determinate ways to how they know the world. He ascribes to the division of labour a bias against intellectualism and oppositional forms of knowledge: "(The) overwhelming priority given to common sense and the importance of anti-intellectualism is a result of working-class experience in the labour process, and other divisions between mental and manual labour" (153). This account has its parallels in investigations of white-collar workers as well (Sobel 1988). Bob Black (1986) argues, polemically, capitalist labour is a chief culprit in human underdevelopment: "Work is a much better explanation for the creeping cretinization all around us than even such significant moronizing mechanisms as television and education" (22).

Yet understood dialectically, the labour process must also contain within it the antithesis of what has been described. That is, the labour process might also be organized as a means of contributing to a critical and aesthetic education by better integrating abstract and sensory comprehension of the material world. As Marx (1977) explains, changes humans bring forth through their coordinated activity transform nature; simultaneous to this is the transformation in human nature that occurs via coordinated, cooperative, and communicative activity: "Through this movement he (*sic*) acts upon external nature and changes it, and in

this way, he (*sic*) changes his own nature” (284). Through this process of subjective objectification, humans gain awareness of their constituting powers by being able to reflect upon what is fabricated via practical activity. This is a means by which people may attain self-knowledge of their collective creative capacities (Sanchez Vasquez 1973).

This is a process that is mediated by language, through the concepts and categories which humans use to classify the material world external to them: “language is practical consciousness ... (and) only arises from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other men (*sic*). Consciousness is therefore from the very beginning a social product” (Marx and Engels 1964, 71). The internalization of that which is external facilitates the intellectual conditions for future acts of objectification. In turn, fabricated objects have to be represented in concepts, via language, in dialectical relations of mutual constitution. Human doing, in-and-through labour processes and concomitant representations, are means of collective conceptualization by which people come to understand they are engaged in social activity. The social, subjective self of concepts, coupled with the body, externalized in its objectifications, is the realization of the unified subject-object of human history (Hennig 2019).

The Work of Journalists: The Labour Process as Medium

In having examined the labour process in abstract terms, my focus now pivots to the specificity of the journalistic labour process. For more than a century now, the activities of newsgathering and news writing have comprised the main elements of journalists’ work process (Ornebring 2010). The first of these two acts involves conceiving of story ideas, conducting research and interviews, and collecting images and audio. Once the journalist has gathered these materials, they would then undertake to write a story or script, depending on whether they are working at a print, broadcast, or online news source (Cotter 2010). Survey data indicates a desire to write as the primary reason for selecting journalism as an occupation (Weaver 2005). Over multiple generations now, journalists have demonstrated a tendency to view themselves as creative workers (McIntyre, 2012). And news writing can be interpreted as an instantiation of creativity as media producers bringing subjectivity into alignment with objectification with the externalization of language upon a screen. This requires representations in language, and derive from engagement with phenomena that are external, located in the material environment (Calcutt and Hammond 2011). The extent to which this occurs—that is, unifying subjectivity with objectification in the labour process—depends upon minimizing the reifying forces mediating between the two.

At corporate outlets, prominent news writing formats such as the inverted pyramid and the nut-graph signify historical developments by which editors and publishers have wrested control over the writing process away from journalists (Im 1997). The ensuing standardization converts journalistic writing from a literary genre into a calculable input, part of a larger industrial process of production (*ibid*). Although such techniques were implemented under the umbrella of journalistic ethics, the appearance of these forms belies an essence shaped strongly by commodity considerations of reducing the time required to write a story (Cohen 2016). However, the alienated character of social relations, which turns human subjectivity into an object and objective factors such as techniques and technologies into subjects, does not reside solely in news writing. With respect to news gathering, and, in particular, the act of conception, the objectivity creed, and its concomitant news values, confronts reporters as a structural feature that is externally imposed by journalism-school instructors, editors, etc.

Once more, this serves to place control over the labour process in the ‘invisible hand’ of commercial imperatives. Here, reified relations denude journalists’ subjectivity as intellectual interests and passions are sublimated to the obligation of answering the five W’s of reportage, providing binary representations of events, etc (Lukacs 1971). By comparison, news values informing story formation at autonomous media projects emerges collectively from all those involved. At Media Co-op outlets, this means reader-subscribers can also collaborate with editorial staff on story ideas and their pursuit (Uzelman 2012).

Those involved can disregard journalistic objectivity, and the power iniquities it masks, which favour the hegemonic bloc. Further to this, skills shares involving editing and production processes are integral to the “success” of autonomous media projects more generally (Jeppesen 2016, 64). This is a further example of the manner in which separation between conception and execution is disintermediated within these endeavours.

Historically speaking, media studies as a discipline has expended much effort in attempting to understand the production, transmission and reception of messages across time and space in large, complex societies (Williams 2003). By way of comparison, medium theorists have exhibited more interest in the effects of media than in the effects of the content media diffuse. Imagined widely, media are complexes of organizations and technologies that facilitate the conveyance of knowledge and understandings in specific ways as conditioned by the qualities of the dominant institutional environment, i.e., as shaped by economic and political power (Comor 1994). An accompanying feature of media, in this sense, is that they are environments in which preferred understandings and conducts become normalized through time. This has its parallels with Marshall McLuhan’s (2001) metaphor of the fish in water, unaware of the medium surrounding it and sustaining it. A medium can therefore be the taken-for-granted ambient setting in which everyday life is enacted. As McLuhan outlines, medium theorists do not conceive of “communication media narrowly, Instead, I am talking about ‘media’ in terms of ... information and perception which forms our thoughts, structures our experience, and determines our views of the world about us” (McLuhan cited in Dowd 2016, 58) When considered from this perspective, the labour process can be thought of as a medium. This is because the labour process constitutes an institutional set of relations, which generates certain ways of knowing and particular ways of being. As a medium facilitative of all manner of exchanges and interactions, the nature of knowledge in the capitalist labour process is characterized by fragmentation, incoherence, and dissonance because of the “monopoly of knowledge” management exercises over it.

Yet again, however, the labour process is also pregnant with its obverse. David Graeber (2002) outlines the progressive epistemological possibilities of the labour process in following manner: “there must be a link between the actual experience of first imagining things, and then bringing them into being, individually or collectively, and the ability to envision social alternatives—particularly, the possibility of a society itself premised on less alienated forms of creativity” (73). In the face of the fragmentation and divisions the capitalist system of production institutes, greater unity between conception and execution communicates, as a medium effect, coherence and totality. These are key attributes of a project involved in developing minimal consciousness (Lukacs 1971). This refers to the subjective capacity to become aware of one’s object status, i.e., a dereifying practice. This preliminary form of self-knowledge precedes class consciousness. It is at the latter stage, when the working classes gain class consciousness, that they become the identical subject-object of history (ibid). This can be interpreted as the attainment of a comprehensive understanding of the totality of capitalist society’s social relations to which the unity of conception and execution in the labour process can contribute.

The Bias of Media: Alternative and Autonomous

Autonomous media projects are empirical examples of the epistemological possibilities Graeber (2002) identifies. Yet some participants’ overdetermined pursuit of an individualized autonomy and subjectivity can hew too closely to some of the prevailing features of neoliberalism (Taylor 2013a). Activism in this guise focuses on crafting a better self and a more pleasurable way of life. Jonathan Smucker (2017) views such undertakings as projects of “private liberation” that affirm the group life of self-selected individuals while eschewing institutional power (123). Consequently, criticism of neoliberal capitalism by those involved in micro-community activities does nothing to undermine it (ibid). Antke Engel (2011) contends this is due to two reasons. The first being the level of self-satisfaction participants feel in being “poor but

happy,” “self-activated,” and forward thinking (Engel 2011, 159). The second is that these very same actors have failed to map, adequately, the “complex interdependencies” of neoliberal capital (ibid).

For Taylor (2013b), starting with the New Left in 1960s, to the more pronounced anarchist influence upon current social movements, there has been a tendency among such activists towards “anti-intellectualism, skepticism of theory, historical amnesia, and bias towards experiential novelty” (16). With theoretical knowledge construction being viewed as a privileged and hierarchical undertaking, an excess of credence given to its validity represents submission to structures of authority. This helps to account for anarchism’s lack of pre-occupation with theoretical and systemic thought, favouring instead, practical life activity (Grubacic 2013). In the latter, there is overlap with Marx’s (1964) outlook. In his theses critiquing the work of Ludwig Feurbach, he writes, “(a)ll social life is essentially practical. All the mysteries which lead theory towards mysticism find their rational solution in human practice” (69). However, decoupling self-determination from self-constitution sidelines valuable elements of Marx’s (1964) praxis. Self-determination in “nowtopian” undertakings becomes a superstructural norm as expressed in participatory forms of organizational governance. This excludes from consideration how the labour process could contribute to a politics of practical activity with its attendant social epistemologies, including processes of subjective objectification. This fuller realization of the labour process as a medium facilitating a critical, aesthetic education requires practical activity to be comprehended theoretically because of the level of abstraction, mediation and complexity determining capitalist social relations (Marx 1964).

Marx’s (1964) criticism of Feurbach can also help focus understanding of blind spots in Marxian-informed advocacy for alternative media projects (Andersson 2012 and Fuchs 2010). Marx (1964) writes that Feurbach’s materialism attends to external reality only in contemplation. A reality external to subjects as comprised of material phenomena receives scrutiny only in the symbolic realm of ideas. This is because Feurbach’s materialism “does not understand human activity itself as objective activity,” i.e., subjective objectification (67). The idealism Marx (1964) detects in Feurbach’s work is present in current counter-hegemonic efforts of contestation treating ideology as a discursive “war of position¹.” This means concern with materialist phenomena such as income inequality and climate change within alternative media remains largely idealist. The idealist preoccupation with stories, narratives, and discourses captures the distorted character of ideology in the cultural/symbolic realm, but it mostly disregards the practical activity of those responsible for the construction of the texts that appear in alternative media. In particular, it fails to examine this activity from the standpoint of subjective objectification. In doing so, it overlooks material expressions of ideology that are veiled. These materializations of ideology are realized in the abstractions of value and money—rooted as they are in private property, commodity production and market exchange—and the labour processes underpinning these phenomena.

In a society predicated largely on the production of commodities, humans come to relate to each other through the medium of money. The value of commodities appears as a natural property independent of the human labour with which they are imbued. Instead of direct social relations between people in their roles as producers and consumers, what transpires under capitalism are highly mediated relations between things. The coordination of human labour in this manner personifies things such as money, commodities, and capital, and it appears as these things are the social actors responsible for constituting the social world. Marx (1977) terms this particular manifestation of alienation, commodity fetishism. Yet if the labour process is the location where this form of ideological domination is generated, it is possible to imagine it as a medium to aid in the demystification of the commodity form as a means to establish a clearer comprehension of capitalist political economy (ibid).

¹ This refers to Antonio Gramsci’s (1971) idea concerning the development of alternative institutions and alternative understandings in the cultural sphere of civil society to contest an entrenched state apparatus in liberal-capitalist democracies.

Conclusion

A key feature in attaining greater understanding of capitalist political economy is knowledge both theoretical and practical. Throughout, I have attempted to demonstrate that despite certain deficits, both a “politics of truth” and a “politics of participation” are epistemologically necessary. In short, as Marx (1964) counsels, theory must encompass practical activity, and practical activity must embrace theory. Despite shared Marxian influences, fissures between alternative and autonomous media understandings remain. Alternative media advocates, with their Marxian analysis of news media, encourage the formation of counter-public spheres. These citizen bodies would then contribute to social movements engaged in counter-hegemonic struggles. Autonomous media adherents have de-emphasized large-scale organizing. Their preferred tactical option is the realization of what a small-scale, post-capitalist formation might look like in the present.

In summarizing these respective positions, the need remains for a sealant binding together the best of alternative and autonomous media traditions in a manner resembling Marx’s (1964) praxis. As Walter Benjamin (2002) explains, it is not enough to populate (alternative) media with critical content. The task is to alter how material is produced as well. To this end, Media Co-op outlets show just how editorial staff, reporters/contributors, and readers are engaged in a virtuous circle in which objectifications dialectically inform subjectivity, and vice versa, as roles in this circuit are fluid, i.e., readers are converted into producers and producers are always readers. From this, one can extrapolate more generally that political activity can be seen as mirroring the labour process. That is, actors need to imagine, to cooperate, and to execute actions involving the use of technologies. In doing so, they simultaneously alter their self-nature as well as that of their external environment.

However, the capitalist labour process as an environment is historically specific, and it therefore transmits dominant assumptions about its social order—from hierarchy to its static nature. It is also the ground upon which commodity fetishism is founded. Yet much of this remains invisible, for as McLuhan (2001) observes, fish are unaware of water as the medium within which they live. Autonomous media projects, by contrast, demonstrate how a re-imagined labour process can become a new kind of medium, making visible certain veiled tendencies within capitalism. But again, this is not the only realm in which ideology operates. People enter into pre-given workplace environments bearing ideologies from the cultural sphere. It is here alternative media can counter prevailing belief systems in a “war of position.” Combined, the importance of alternative and autonomous media projects is the further development of understandings that confront the capitalist hegemonic bloc, and the ideal and material ideologies it generates. Both therefore contribute to Marxian understandings of politics as activity that is theoretical and practical, engaged in educative processes simultaneously abstract and aesthetic.

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