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Understanding Alternative Media Power

Mapping Content & Practice to Theory, Ideology, and Political Action

Sandra Jeppesen

Alternative media is a term that signifies a range of media forms and practices, from radical critical media to independent media, and from grassroots autonomous media to community, citizen and participatory media. This paper critically analyzes the political content and organizational practices of different alternative media types to reveal the ideologies and conceptions of power embedded in specific conceptions of alternative media. Considering several competing conceptions of alternative media theory, including subculture studies (Hebdige 1979), community media for social change (Rodríguez 2011), critical communication studies (Fuchs 2010), and radical media (Downing 2001), four distinct categories emerge: DIY media influenced by individualist ideologies and subcultural belonging; citizen media theorized by third-world Marxism and engaged in local community organizing; critical media influenced by the Frankfurt School of critical theory and focused on global anti-capitalist content; and autonomous media influenced by social anarchism and rooted in global anti-authoritarian social movements. This synthesized taxonomy provides an important mapping of key similarities and differences among the diverse political projects, theories, practices and ideologies of alternative media, allowing for a more comprehensive and nuanced

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understanding of the limitations and political challenges to media power afforded by specific types of alternative media.

Keywords: alternative media; autonomous media; critical media; DIY; subculture; participatory media; citizens media; Marxism; anarchism; individualism

Alternative media theory examines the production of counter-hegemonic representations that have the potential to contest mainstream media power. Growing in popularity as a field of study since Chris Atton's important book *Alternative Media* (2001), 'alternative media' now seems to signify so many forms of media that it no longer designates anything specific. Pajnik and Downing provide a list of descriptors for 'alternative media—whether identified as “grassroots,” “independent,” “community,” “participatory,” “self-managed,” “autonomous,” “tactical,” or “alternative” (2008, 7). Rodríguez et al. identify a similar list of terms: 'alternative media, social movements media, participatory media, community media, radical media, grassroots media, autonomous media, the French term “médias libres,” the Spanish term “medios populares,” and citizens' media' (2014, 151). Bailey et al. argue that 'alternative media are articulated in many different ways – not only in relation to the mainstream media, but also as community media, as civil society media, and as rhizomatic media' (2008, xii). And Atton makes yet another list: 'In addition to 'alternative media', we will find terms such as alternative journalism, citizen journalism, citizen's media, community media, democratic media, emancipatory media, radical media and social movement media' (2007, 18). Seldom are these terms distinguished from one another in theoretical ways; rather these lists of terms seem to serve as equivalencies for the generalized category of 'alternative media'. However, critical attention to the distinctions among these forms of alternative media, including their ideological underpinnings, political values, social movement commitments, and conceptions of the empowered subject is crucial to understanding alternative media power. It is also key to exploring ways in which global alternative media might come together to strengthen their political projects across difference. But first we must know what these differences are.

Theorists and practitioners tend to stake competing claims for the function, purpose, content and organizational forms of alternative media. A closer look reveals at least seven specific contradictory claims. First, in terms of content, Pajnik and Downing (2008) argue that right-wing media can be alternative, as does Atton (2006), whereas other scholars (Fuchs 2010; Jeppesen et al. 2014) suggest that alternative media must have leftist social justice goals. Second, in terms of process, Atton (2002), Downing (2001) and others have indicated that horizontal organizational forms of media production are as important as products, a position disputed by Fuchs (2010) who asserts that a critical anti-capitalist message is key.

Third, in terms of the size of media organizations, Pajnik and Downing argue that alternative media is small scale or nano-media, a claim echoed by Lievrouw (2011), whereas Fuchs asserts the need for alternative media to be large-scale, and Jeppesen et al. (2014) have found that alternative media ranges from small- to large-scale depending on specific objectives.

Fourth, focusing on media methods for the creation of social change, Lievrouw (2011) suggests that alternative and activist new media may be subcultural and ironic in stance (e.g. culture jamming), whereas Rodríguez (2001) shows that alternative media is used to provide perspectives on human rights violations, and Mattoni (2013) analyzes how they support mass protest mobilizations against austerity, neither of which are subcultural or humorous. Fifth, sharing Rodríguez's perspective, Bailey et al. (2008) suggest that alternative media serve a community, whereas Atton (2007, 21-22) suggests that alternative media practitioners such as bloggers write about personal experience rather than community objectives, and hope to gain a general audience beyond their community. Moreover, Khan (2010) notes that racialized, gendered, or heteronormative power dynamics arise in alternative media production, calling into question who counts as community. Sixth, Bailey et al. argue that alternative media is connected to civil society, advocating with NGOs and other institutions to change government policy, whereas Downing, among others, suggests that media activists are constructing alternatives in grassroots organizations that may also be anti-state (Downing 2001, Atton 2002, 2007, Breton et al. 2012a). Other theorists argue alternative media producers are engaged in cultural citizenship producing culture as political action in and of itself (Zobl and Drüeke 2012, Ratto and Boler 2014). Seventh, some theorists argue that alternative citizens' media provide opportunities for production by non-professional media producers (Rodríguez et al. 2014, Atton 2002), whereas Jeppesen et al. (2014) find that many grassroots media activists have degrees in media or communication studies. Conversely, Deuze argues that citizen journalists (e.g. citizens who capture live footage on cell phone cameras) typically contribute their footage to mainstream TV news, rather than alternative media (2006, 272).

These seven sets of contradictions and tensions in the alternative mediascape, I argue, derive from the fact that scholars signify different things by 'alternative media'. To clarify our understanding of alternative media and its potential challenges to power, we need to examine the different theoretical foundations and underlying ideological perspectives. Accordingly, this paper identifies four key categories of alternative media (DIY, community, critical, and autonomous); maps them according to content, processes, and social movement actions; and analyzes their political ideologies, considering who is claimed as the empowered subject.

The mediascape has changed profoundly with Web 2.0 with the addition of digital media affordances to the repertoire of contention, including such practices as user-generated content (van Dijck 2009), clicktivism (Karpf 2012), hacktivism

ism (Milberry 2012), hashtag activism (Thrift 2014, Gerbaudo 2012), connective action (Bennett and Segerberg 2013), and more, but these specific digital media practices are outside the scope of this paper. One might argue that the ideological and political foundations of the four categories of alternative media proposed here provide a decision-making framework regarding the uptake of digital technologies in specific alternative media practices (e.g. should Facebook be used in anti-capitalist organizing? Does it put users at risk of state surveillance? Or does it provide opportunities for horizontal organizing?). One might also argue that technologies shape media practices (e.g. as per Bennett and Segerberg [2013], following the logic of connective action, activists less often join large groups in collective action but mobilize connectively through personalized digital actions). These important debates will continue be taken up beyond the pages of this article.

Four Theoretical Foundations of Alternative Media

	DIY media & Culture	Community & Citizen Media	Critical Media	Autonomous & Radical Media
Theoretical foundation	Birmingham School; Subcultural studies	Development Communication; Communication for Social Change (CfSC)	Frankfurt School; Critical Theory	Anarchist theory; Social Movement theories
Key text	Dick Hebdige <i>Subculture, the Meaning of Style</i> (1979)	Clemencia Rodríguez <i>Fissures in the mediascape: An international study of citizens' media</i> (2001)	Christian Fuchs <i>Foundations of Critical Media and Information Studies</i> (2011)	John Downing <i>Radical Media</i> (1984, 2001)

Table 1. Theoretical Foundations of the Four Types of Alternative Media

DIY Media and Culture

Theories of do-it-yourself (DIY) media and culture emerged out of the Birmingham School of cultural studies, specifically in the field of subcultural studies. In Dick Hebdige's seminal work in this field, *Subculture: the Meaning of Style* (1979), he argued that the post-war breakdown of consent was reflected in the development of youth subcultures, such as mods, teds and punks, who challenged cultural hegemony through style, music, fashion, and underground culture, including alternative media such as punk fanzines, music, and art. In particular, punks were attempting to carve out a space for cultural production where musicians had

more control over their music, and used music and fashion to challenge social norms. Punk lifestyle practices signaled counter-hegemonic identities for disillusioned working-class and middle-class youth who rejected consumer capitalism. Sub-identities developed such as Afropunk, Riot Grrrl, and Homo-core, challenging straight-white-male domination within the punk scene itself. Responding to the underground movement of punk, capitalism quickly co-opted the subculture, first through commodification, where torn clothing and safety pins were soon seen on fashion runways, and second, through ideological incorporation, where punks were redefined in the mainstream media as being ‘just like other kids.’ Both forms of incorporation removed the political resistance in punk media and culture, selling disillusion back to youth cultures as a commodity. This form of alternative media emphasizes empowerment through subcultural identity and belonging, cultural citizenship, challenging commodification and the branding of youth, and emphasizing independent cultural production outside of the corporate mainstream (however not necessarily anti-capitalist).

Duncombe (1997) explores the subcultural, underground roots of zines as a particular form of DIY alternative media, arguing that ‘zinesters’ or zine producers ‘consider what they do as an alternative to and strike against commercial culture and consumer capitalism’ (3) by creating spaces that are a ‘haven in a heartless world’ (174) where the personal can actuate the political.

Atton (2002) also focuses on zines and alternative news media in his early work, suggesting that the process of producing zines is as important to zinesters as the final content. He argues that mass media news is socially constructed, and that ‘the alternative press’s responses to such construction [are] demonstrated not simply by critiques of those media but by their own construction of news, based on alternative values and frameworks of news-gathering and access’ (Atton 2002, 10). These alternative values influence what DIY media producers deem newsworthy in terms of content, and also how they relate to readers and social movements. Atton offers examples of ‘activist-run, grassroots alternative press of the UK’ (83), including *Green Anarchist*, *SchNEWS*, *Do or Die!*, and *Squall*. He asserts that organizational forms with ‘loose internal structures’ (83) are key, as participants reduce hierarchies, rotate tasks, share skills, and use consensus decision-making, all based on ‘an anti-authoritarian ethos’ (83).

Important in promoting zine culture, the Riot Grrrl movement established oppositional political frameworks through DIY female-centric music scenes. The Riot Grrrl movement started in Washington DC in the summer of 1991 (Kaltfleiter 2009, 227). Many of the women in the punk scene were ‘talking about starting their own revolution—girl riot—against a society they felt offered neither validation nor legitimization of girls and women’s experiences. . . . Riot Grrrl shows served as stages of empowerment that broadened transgressive arenas of music, visual art, street politics, and personal writing’ (227-8). Zines and other media and

art produced by punk women communicated feminist concerns, not just about the music industry, but about politics in general. DIY media is thus often connected to the politics of everyday life, as participants choose lifestyles and make media that challenge society's oppressive norms.

The DIY party and protest movement is a political activist subculture theorized by McKay (1998) in his book on Reclaim the Streets (RtS), a festive dance party and roving street protest. Starting in London UK, RtS quickly spread to global locations. Like No-Border Camps and Queeruption, it is a banner group with autonomous chapters that organize protest convergences in different cities. RtS challenges the dominance of road culture, shutting down streets to cars and using them for protest parties. No-Border Camps offer multi-day camps on borders challenging immigration policies (Feigenbaum, Frenzel & McCurdy 2013). Queeruption organizes autonomous spaces for radical queer culture (Brown 2007).

Cultural citizenship theory emerges with DIY alternative media at its centre (Ratto and Boler 2014), and a strong focus on feminist perspectives (Zobl and Drueke 2012). Payne argues that feminist-oriented 'alternative media plays a crucial role in the constitution and negotiation of political interests and collective identities' (2012, 66) for women. Feminist DIY media production and content together produce feminist subjects, she argues, rather than simply reflecting a pre-determined political position. Subcultural movements create social spaces for the sharing and creation of alternative political ideas and subjectivities.

The challenge in DIY culture is the tendency of capitalism to co-opt subversive cultural movements, therefore the focus remains on finding ways for counter-hegemonic cultures to resist incorporation. The Riot Grrrls, for example, refused to speak to the corporate media. Other media activists open their own social centres, such as Ste-Émilie Skillshare in Montreal, a DIY community arts space organized by queer and trans people of colour (Jeppesen, Kruzynski & Riot, forthcoming). DIY spaces are not easily incorporated, as they are self-managed and collectively run. The concerns of DIY media revolve around identity, ownership of cultural production, resistance to co-optation, and self-empowerment.

Community and Citizen Media

Sharing the concern of DIY media for self-representation of marginalized groups, the work of community and citizen media emerged out of the 'international field that was first labeled Communication and Development (or Development Communication), better known today as Communication for Social Change (CfSC)' (Rodríguez et al. 2014, 151). The dominant development communication paradigm had assumed that media was both an indicator and a facilitator of modernization in so-called developing countries. Challenges to this framework emerged from dependency theory, which suggested that the relationship of the Global

North (core) to the Global South (periphery) risked reifying and maintaining the existing differential development of the core and periphery.

Rejecting the modernization model of development communication, where development agencies from the Global North would implant new communication technologies in the Global South, local community media was developed involving community member participation at all stages, particularly in the planning and decision-making of media initiatives. Community and citizens' media is thus situated in anti-colonial and postcolonial theories, and relies on thinkers such as Paolo Freire and Frantz Fanon, both of whom wrote about the grassroots community struggles of colonized people to overthrow their oppressors, the former through radical pedagogies (Freire 1970), and the latter through the use of a range of strategies from community organizing to armed struggle (Fanon 1961).

Situated in this intellectual context, Clemencia Rodríguez (2001) has found that citizens' media are not just informational, but also dialogical, as community media is a space for the practice of citizenship. Citizens' media add to the concept of community participation the notion that citizens who represent themselves, their needs, concerns, perspectives and ideological positions in local alternative media are participating in the public sphere in a variety of ways:

community communicators use media technologies to 'trigger' different types of communication processes—they intervene to repopulate the public sphere, to activate interaction between local government officials and their constituencies, or to trigger performative communication happenings. (Rodríguez et al. 2014, 159)

Community and civic participation arise from community-based communicative action, and community radio is not simply an alternative news channel, but rather a hub for community dialogues, social-political action, and interactions among community members.

Bailey et al. similarly argue that alternative media must first and foremost be understood as serving a community. They suggest that community is defined by 'close and concrete human ties and by a collective identity' (2008, 7), similar to a big family (8). They also locate these features beyond geographical proximities, in communities of shared interest or practice, and interpretive, imagined or virtual communities (8-9). They articulate community media production as a pedagogy of the oppressed (Freire 1970), where students co-produce knowledge with their teachers in a process of coming to consciousness or *concientizacion*. As such they argue that 'participation is situated in a context of reduction in power imbalances' (Bailey et al. 2008, 12). People producing citizens' media develop a growing sense of themselves as participants in democratic decision-making, able to influence policy-makers and shape the direction of their local communities, often addressing inequities and human rights violations.

Bailey et al. derive their definition of alternative media from AMARC, the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters¹, a global organization with roots in Latin American community radio. AMARC defines community radio as ‘a “non-profit” station, currently broadcasting, which offers a service to the community in which it is located, or to which it broadcasts, while promoting the participation of this community in the radio’ (Bailey et al. 2008, 7). The conclusion follows that alternative media serve a community, and ‘empower community members to co-decide at both the level of media content and organization’ (14). Much of their theorizing derives from international organizations such as AMARC, UNESCO, etc., in contradistinction to DIY theory, which derives its practices and ideas from grassroots cultural producers. The field of community and citizens’ media has an international scope and tends to derive its case studies, theories and ideologies from the Global South. Indeed this is now ‘arguably the most internationalized area of research’ (Rodríguez et al. 2014, 162) within alternative media studies.

Huesca and Dervin argue that ‘the underlying dialectical symbiosis of the theoretical and applied remains the single most important factor distinguishing Latin American communication theory as a coherent body of work’ (1994, 54), with challenges to the dominance of Western ideologies playing a close second (55), emphasizing power differences or ‘inegalitarian structures within cultures and between nations’ (55). Global colonial and neoliberal politics have been key concerns, in addition to challenging ‘unidirectional information flows’ (56) and offering ‘global political strategies for transforming the status quo’ (63). Moreover they argue that ‘Fundamental to a theory grounded in praxis was the notion that education, politics, culture, or communication could not be distanced *from* the social bases, which must serve as their own example in the struggle for *concientizacion*’ (63). They demonstrate how the field of CfSC integrates cultural studies, transnational studies, empirical case studies and an emphasis on praxis, arguing for both a deeper understanding of the interdisciplinarity of this field by non-Latin American scholars, and the need to move beyond the limitations of oppositionality or alterity (67). Howley’s edited collection *Understanding Community Media* also demonstrates the shift within community media studies to understanding ways in which local community media fit into global movements in the postcolonial context. However we must be careful to understand that CfSC strongly emphasizes countering relationships of inequality not only within communities of practice, but also from the perspective of these communities in critical relation to an intensifying global political, economic, and cultural Western hegemony in the era of neoliberalism.

1. The acronym comes from the French: *Association Mondiale Des Radiodiffuseurs Communautaires*

Critical Media

Critical media has emerged out of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, analyzing alternative media from the perspective of its role in capitalism, whereby its focus on inequality under neoliberal capital links it to community media. In *Foundations of Critical Media and Information Studies*, Christian Fuchs posits that, 'Alternative media are mass media that challenge the dominant capitalist forms of media' (2011, 298). Key for critical media, however, is fostering a Habermasian public sphere. Fuchs therefore argues against the demassification of audiences into niche counter-publics, such as one might find in DIY punk media, or local community media, and in favour of building a diverse but unified global anti-capitalist counter-public. This counter-public must be proletarian, including any groups in oppressive work relations under neoliberalism in the post-economic-crisis context. Critical media also builds on Horkheimer and Adorno's critical analysis of consumer culture, in which audience reception is painted as a form of false consciousness. Fuchs suggests that, 'citizen journalism, self-managed ownership, alternative distribution and critical reception are desirable qualities of alternative media,' but, he argues, 'not necessary conditions' (2011, 301).

Fuchs makes a strong argument for the 'ideal case for journalism,' which would be 'a different societal framework, which allows all citizens to have the time, skills and resources so that they can all act as critical journalists' (2011, 301). This differs from community media, which privileges not journalism skills but personal experience and perspectives in media. In Fuchs' alternative society, the practices of writers and readers of media would be enacted in a Habermasian public sphere that is fully inclusive, 'in which decisions are taken collectively in participatory grassroots processes' (301). This is a society which Fuchs argues is completely at odds with the functioning of capitalism and thus impossible to create in the present. He suggests that leftist magazines with broad circulation such as *Z Magazine* and *The New Internationalist*, despite practices of professional journalism and hierarchical editorial structures, should be considered alternative media because of their anti-capitalist content and widespread distribution. This is an important characteristic of critical media, emphasizing content and reception over participatory structures.

Critical media puts an emphasis on widely distributed messages that reach and construct large counter-publics. While patriarchy, racism and sexism should be critiqued, Fuchs argues that these dominations must be articulated to capital. The critical media approach emerged in the Euro-American anti-austerity post-economic-crisis context, which has reinstated the centrality of class divisions. Therefore, the underlying assumptions about the public sphere depend on not just the producers, but also the audience being proletariat, which Fuchs expands to include many groups in oppressive work relations under neoliberalism.

Critical media scholars increasingly take a political economy approach to alternative media (Brophy et al. 2015, among others). Dyer-Witheford, for example, suggests there must be ‘new ways in which emergent media networks are made to circulate struggles rather than commodities’ (1999, 60). These struggles take place through critical media production and reception that challenges contemporary neoliberal capitalism. Cohen argues similarly that ‘a dynamic Marxist political economy approach can account for the processes, practices, and structures that have resulted in the increasing precarization of cultural work’ (2012, 142) including the production of alternative media. This requires ‘broadening the focus from individual experiences to consider cultural workers as part of a class of workers struggling over the terms of the commodification of their labour power’ (144). In other words, critical media theory focuses on collectively organized media production, considering the role of media activists as exploited and often unpaid workers. The primary concern of critical media then is to build a global anti-capitalist counter-public of producers and readers powerful enough to overthrow neoliberal capitalism.

Autonomous and Radical Media

Theories of autonomous and radical media emerge out of the social anarchist and anti-authoritarian theoretical fields, including social movement studies and, more recently, intersectionality theory. In *Radical Media* (1984, 2001), John Downing introduces social anarchist perspectives that emphasize radical content and organizational structures of alternative media. Downing argues that the means of production and distribution must be ethically consistent with the ends. An ‘aspect of anarchism’s angle of vision ...is prefigurative politics, the attempt to practice socialist principles in the present, not merely to imagine them for the future. Self-managed media represent one such project’ (Downing 2001, 71). The organizational structures, similar to the community media approach, must allow for participatory decision-making and self-management of media work.

In *Autonomous Media* (2005), Langlois and Dubois suggest that, ‘True alternative discourses can only be fostered through a media organization that remains open, transparent, and non-hierarchical. For that reason, autonomous media move beyond the issues of content and into those of organization, participation, and empowerment’ (9). They consider feminist media, indigenous film-making, video and radio, and the rise of online communicative action (11) all to be key in autonomous media. Anarchist culture emphasizes the horizontal organizational structure of media practices:

anarchist values and practices are against domination, be it in the form of hierarchies, unequal power relations, structural inequities, or authoritarian behaviours. Media practices derive from this principle. (Jeppesen 2012, 264)

Rather than top-down relationships of domination, David Widginton suggests that collective ‘members take the time to discuss issues, make decisions by consensus, share skills and responsibilities, and take collective credit for their successes’ (2005, 113). The focus is on shared power and collective responsibility. Moreover ‘it is within this structure that skills are most often transferred from one activist videographer to another’ (113). In the prefigurative collective model, cooperation is emphasized along with sharing of skills, resources, knowledge, and success.

Jesse Cohn (2008) argues that the content of representations and the organization of groups producing these representations are linked in critical ways. He suggests that anarchists ‘rejected what they saw as the overly schematic representations of change and relation in Marxist theory, which seemed all too clearly related to an authoritarian will to schematize and represent in practice’ (80). For anarchists, media and cultural production need to be more open-ended, ethical, horizontal and experimental:

Insisting on the ethical coordination of means and ends, rather than a centralized, hierarchical revolutionary movement and a dictatorship of the proletariat, they proposed decentralized, horizontal federations of self-managing units as the most appropriate organizational form. (80)

Through consistency of means and ends, prefigurative media makes textual and visual political arguments that critique all forms of domination (the ends), while organizing in collective and cooperative horizontal modes that challenge all forms of domination (the means).

In addition to being anti-authoritarian, autonomous media are linked to and work with global protest movements. Langlois and Dubois argue that, ‘Autonomous media are the vehicles of social movements. They are attempts to subvert the social order by reclaiming the means of communication’ (2005, 9). They are rooted in global social movements such as the anti-globalization movement, Occupy, anti-G20 protests, and anti-austerity movements, producing protest media that support and report on mass social movement convergences. Downing suggests this ‘implies something active and on the streets’ (2001, 9). Autonomous media are integral to protest and other types of connective action (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012) in social justice movements.

The relationship of autonomous media producers to their audience is one of shared concerns:

Audiences and movements do not live segregated the one from the other. In the ongoing life of social movements, audiences overlap with movement activity, and the interrelation may be very intense between the audiences for media, including radical alternative media, and those movements. (Downing 2001, 9)

By situating autonomous media within social movements—‘Movement upsurges appear both to generate and to be stimulated by radical media’ (23)—Downing demonstrates that the autonomous political commitments of the social movements themselves are reproduced in the production processes of media. These include decision making in general assemblies, non-hierarchical leadership, deconstruction of gendered, racialized and/or heteronormative power dynamics, and attention to process, traditions emerging from anarchist-feminism.

‘Socialist and feminist anarchism’s identification of multiple sources of subordination beyond capitalism’s directly economic dimension’ (Downing 2001, 12) has influenced autonomous media practices of anti-oppression politics. The understanding of multiple interconnected forms of oppression can be traced back to thinkers such as Emma Goldman. Downing argues that, ‘the breadth of her concerns is evident—the theater, women’s rights, contraceptive education, sexuality, prisons, puritanism, patriotism’ (13). Grounded in this complexity of thought, Downing’s theories of autonomous media examine ‘resistance to multiple sources of oppression, [which] requires dialogue across the varying sectors—by gender; by race, ethnicity, and nationality; by age; by occupational grouping’ (19). Downing integrates anti-racist feminist critiques of intersectional oppressions into the foundations of his analysis, including a feminist critique of the Habermasian public sphere based on Nancy Fraser’s idea of the counter-public taken up in anarchist thinking on queer autonomous counter-publics (Brown 2007, Jeppesen 2010, Heckert 2013).

The theoretical foundation of autonomous media derives from anarchist traditions of theory and practice, as well as social movement theory and feminist intersectionality theory, emphasizing concerns regarding content and structure, horizontalism, prefiguration, mutual aid or sharing and cooperation, social movement integration, and challenging interlocking oppressions.

Mapping Alternative Media: Content, Process & Social Movements

From the theoretical perspectives above, it becomes clear that different types of alternative media will emphasize different content, engage different processes of production and modes of organization, and undertake different types of social movement actions and interactions.

Criteria	DIY Media & Culture	Community & Citizen Media	Critical Media	Autonomous & Radical Media
Content (politics, goals)	Self-representation of individuals; Subcultural identity; The personal is political	Self-representation of communities; Engage civil society	Anti-capitalist counter-hegemonic; Create counter-public sphere	Self-representation of movements; Anti-oppression politics
Processes (organization, structure)	Individuals or small loose-knit collectives; Do It Yourself; Amateur; 'nano' scale	Participatory media; Community involvement; Skill sharing	Vertical or horizontal; Professional; Preferably large scale	Horizontal; Prefigurative; Skill sharing; Quasi-professional; Small to large scale
Social movement actions & interactions	Engaged in cultural citizenship	Represent the community's issues for the community's benefit	Report on anti-capitalist and anti-corporate social movements; Organic intellectuals of social movement	Support and report on a range of interrelated anti-authoritarian social movements; Media in action

Table 2. Mapping the four types of alternative media

Content

The content of DIY media focuses predominantly on the self-representation of individuals and sometimes loose-knit groups, such as Riot Grrrls, emphasizing subcultural identities based on race, class, gender and/or sexuality as articulated with music and politics or other cultural forms. On the other hand, community and citizen media will produce content that reflects events or issues in the community, often from an anti-colonial third-world perspective. Critical media engages civil society at the level of counter-hegemonic anti-capitalist ideas, and develops content that critically analyses the current neoliberal regime. Autonomous and anarchist media focuses on the collective self-representation of social movements, specifically engaging anti-oppression politics to analyze the interlocking nature of class, racialized, gendered and heteronormative oppressions (Breton et al. 2012b).

While DIY media and community media may both be interested in empowerment and the self-representation of marginalized groups, DIY media is constitutive of these groups, whereas community media presumes the pre-existence of a community. For example, DIY media constituted the existence of Riot Grrrl as a cultural movement that did not pre-exist its own media (music, zines, etc.), whereas the communities in Colombia studied by Rodríguez were already geographically fixed communities with shared political interests before members started producing radio shows. They may nonetheless have been constituted as a more cohesive community through their use of media, moving from imagined to real communities.

Similarly, both critical and autonomous media represent anti-capitalist movements and concepts, however they may do so from different perspectives. Critical media for example may focus on interventions in governance toward economic justice against austerity measures, or even Marxist, socialist or communist alternatives in party politics, whereas autonomous media might focus on queer anti-capitalist anti-homonormative alternatives to pride, such as the Montreal based *Pervers/Cité*, or *Gay Shame* in San Francisco; or movements that are as much anti-state as anti-capitalist and anti-racist, such as the no-border politics espoused through grassroots immigrant and refugee activism of no-border camps.

Process

Process is understood to include the decision-making and production processes of media collectives, including organizational strategies and structures. DIY media tends to be unstructured or informally structured, being produced by individuals, small collectives or loosely knit groups. The media production tends to be amateur or non-professional, and the scale is typically nano (Downing and Pajnik 2008), though sometimes small-scale locally produced material such as zines may travel surprising distances and be copied an unexpectedly high number of times,

such as the *Elaho Valley Anarchist Horde* zine of which more than 3000 copies were distributed (Jeppesen 2012).

Community and citizen media are also amateur, tending to be locally produced for the communities in which they are situated, engaging civil society and attempting to influence local and perhaps regional decision-making. People learn how to make media by participating in media making, through skill-shares and hands-on learning, building in anti-oppression knowledge co-production.

Autonomous media are sometimes more formally structured than DIY media, with prefigurative horizontal consensus decision-making. They also use skill sharing, but this might be through formally organized and facilitated workshops run by quasi-professional members of the collective. Autonomous media may range from small to large scale, depending on specifically articulated goals.

Critical media do not prioritize organizational forms, and may therefore be either vertical or horizontal; they are often more professionalized and larger scale than DIY, citizen, or autonomous media.

Social Movement Actions

This is the category where the greatest differences appear to play out. DIY media and culture are active in the political sphere of cultural citizenship through the production of music. For example, Riot Grrrls created an anti-corporate independent feminist punk music scene.

Community and citizen media, on the other hand, are focused on making change together with everyone in the community at a local level. DIY media tends to create a specific scene or alternative community based on identities, which may be subcultural or racialized, gendered, queer, etc., and may also exist on a national or international scale, whereas citizen media is typically active within an existing local community.

Critical media are different again, as they serve as a space for developing strategies for anti-capitalist politics, where content is produced by ‘organic intellectuals’. This role is perhaps similar to the role of musicians who write political lyrics and may be seen as opinion leaders with the power to influence others. The organic intellectual model is somewhat different to the participatory model that values experience as knowledge (rather than legitimating knowledge through credentials such as education, professional position, or social status).

Autonomous media are rooted in social movements, supporting and reporting on a range of related anti-authoritarian movements from the local to the global. They produce media as a form of direct action, and media producers are often involved in grassroots issues-based activist groups in addition to media activism.

Alternative Media: Ideologies

In order to understand the political projects of these four forms of alternative media, it is necessary to unpack the underlying ideologies of the theories being used to analyze them, and which also are influential within specific media practices. Althusser defines ideology as the ‘imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence’ (1993 [1971], 36). This definition is useful here because the imaginary relationship is constructed through media representations that tell us how to interpret our world. Alternative media constructs alternative representations, which construct alternative imaginary relationships to our lived material conditions. By material conditions we understand not just economic conditions but also relations of gender, sex, race, disAbility, religion, policing, etc. as inscribed through ideological systems such as education, religion, government, mainstream media and the arts.

Each type of alternative media posits a different ideology, a different imaginary relationship to material conditions of existence. As these types of media deconstruct relationships of domination, there is a complex set of assumptions regarding who is dominated or disempowered in society, and how alternative media can facilitate their empowerment. This understanding of media power is constructed on underlying ideological assumptions. While much alternative media theory considers content to be counter-hegemonic, little attention has been paid to the specific hegemony being countered. Better understanding the ideological assumptions of alternative media types will help us to understand conceptions of hegemony and power, providing new avenues for assessing specific alternative media outputs in terms of their efficacy, sustainability and resilience in challenging media power.

Criteria	DIY	Community & Citizen	Critical Media	Autonomous & Radical
Ideology	Left Libertarian (Individualism)	Post-colonial (Third-world Marxism)	Marxist (Anti-capitalism)	Anarchist (Social anarchism, Anti-authoritarianism)
Core value	Individual self-empowerment	Community empowerment	Economic justice	Collective autonomy
Who claims power	The individual	The community	The post-industrial proletariat	‘The people’, collectively organized

Table 3. Ideology, values and power in the four types of alternative media

DIY Media and Culture

DIY media is based on a left libertarian or individualistic ideology. The DIY discourse implies that nobody is going to do it for you, and emphasizes the independence of individuals in society. DIY media focus on developing individual self-empowerment, often through subcultural belonging. Cultural production is engaged alone or in small groups, allowing the establishment of safer spaces for people with shared identities. These are key media for self-empowerment of people typically silenced in society, and fertile grounds for new theories and expressions of identity, self, the body and agency. DIY media challenge working-class and middle-class lifestyles in different ways by claiming outsider positions in which to participate, and to produce culture by engaging a more authentic reality. DIY media producers shift from a disenfranchised social location to self-empowerment through cultural citizenship. Quintessential forms are the punk band, the Riot Grrrl zine, the DIY art space, and the blog.

This form of alternative media reconceptualizes power along Foucauldian lines as exercised from multiple points (the web of power), or feminist lines where power-with via cooperation supplants competitive or oppressive forms of power-over. Media producers struggle to achieve empowerment through the production of media, moving from a disempowered and disenfranchised social location to one of voice and small media power. For some scholars, this may be theorized as youth culture, where DIY media can be a narrative space of coming of age or coming to political consciousness. The emphasis on power residing within the individual is consistent with a libertarian political ideology, with echoes of individualism.

It becomes more complex, however, when groups engaged in cultural citizenship move beyond the music, art, culture jamming, graffiti or knit bombing scenes to integrate cultural production into social movements. When DIY spaces are formed as cultural centers, for example, they open opportunities for small loose-knit collectives to grow into or connect with larger counter-hegemonic political or social movements. DIY spaces such as queer autonomous zones provide avenues for collective DIY cultural production. This illustrates how these four categories are neither static—groups and individuals change over time—nor impermeable—types of media production may overlap in particular ways or with respect to some value practices, but not others.

Community and Citizen Media

The ideological perspective of community and citizen media is post-colonial third-world Marxism, a key ideological perspective of the anti-globalization movement, and contemporary anti-capitalist movements against imperialism, neoliberalism and neo-colonialism, which often originate in the Global South. The core value underlying citizen media is community empowerment in achieving local social change through participatory media led by those directly affected (rather than

individual empowerment in DIY media, or top-down cultural imperialist development communication). As such, the community engaged here both pre-exists the creation of media and is constructed by media dialogues. The quintessential form is community radio.

Community and citizens' media focus on participatory media. Whereas the international development model of communication was a top-down colonial model, often led by NGOs in the Global North, the community and citizen radio model of communication is a bottom-up anti-colonial model led by members of the community who challenge dominant global media forms and political messages by developing local community-led media power.

In contradistinction to DIY media, typically found in urban centers connecting many cities (for example, Riot Grrrl has spread to Russia, via Pussy Riot), community media may often be found in small towns and rural locations. No longer limited to the Global South, however, community media theories and practices have expanded to be taken up globally. Programming can be progressive but it is not always so; nor are stations necessarily organized non-hierarchically.

Some community radio shows broadcast messages of a diasporic community, and will present a range of opinions, ideas, and musical content from that community. They will not necessarily be anti-capitalist, feminist, anti-racist, or anti-colonial. This is complicated by the fact that within a single community radio station, the range of ideological perspectives represented in programming may be vast. There may be anarchist, DIY, community and critical content of all kinds being broadcast on a single North American community radio station; however there may also be racist or sexist content, for example, in some of the music being played. The station might be a community radio station, with the goal to empower communities, and the communities who produce the various programs are given the freedom to determine their own content. Community empowerment is still key. However, the anti-imperialist ideological position that grounds community and citizen media in Latin American community media engagement may fall away in some cases in the Global North. Community and citizen media prioritizes skill-sharing and capacity development within local communities, along with participatory open structures and processes, and the goal of serving a local community, empowering that community, and locating power within the community itself.

Critical Media

Critical media reflect and construct an anti-capitalist position from a Western Marxist ideological perspective, with an explicit focus on economic justice. This type of media represents counter-hegemonic global anti-capitalist movements of the post-industrial proletariat, the *flexploited* or *digital precariat* (who may have low incomes despite being well educated). Critical media build a diversified anti-

capitalist response to the global economic system through critical content and counter-publics. 'They aim at and express the need for the establishment of a co-operative, participatory society' (Fuchs 2011, 303) but need not be produced through co-operative participatory structures which, according to Fuchs, are difficult if not impossible to establish and sustain within a capitalist society. The quintessential form is the widely distributed anti-capitalist magazine.

Critical media presume that the power to establish strong counter-hegemonic, specifically anti-capitalist social movements and their media emanates from or is situated within the post-industrial proletariat. Fuchs uses Hardt and Negri's notion of the multitude to argue that the proletariat has grown beyond the 'industrial wage labour class' (306) to include 'the unemployed, houseworkers, migrant workers, developing countries, retirees, students, precarious workers, precarious self-employment and knowledge workers' (306).

In the era of austerity measures, assuredly it is important to acknowledge that the working class has changed; however, this list bears interrogation. Not all of these subject positions are individual victims of capitalism or economic injustice. Retirees, for example, may include people struggling to make ends meet on a low fixed income, as well as those with substantial pensions and investments. Knowledge workers in the high tech sector may be highly educated and lucratively employed. However, perhaps the most incongruent item on the list is developing countries, which are firstly, not a social class, and secondly, socially stratified with extremes of wealth and poverty rather than being uniformly victims of economic justice. Omissions from this list include such positions as retail workers, the underemployed, workers with multiple minimum wage jobs living below the poverty line, and service industry workers, as well as many sectors of contemporary post-industrial labour that are often overlooked, as they are gendered female (e.g. sweat-shop workers, childcare workers, and sex workers). Critical media focuses specifically on the post-industrial proletariat to build a diversified anti-capitalist response to hegemony through alternative media content. This proletariat is no longer a factory worker or peasant, but rather takes up a vast portion of the precarious post-austerity workforce. Anti-capitalist media workers or media activists both participate in this new exploited proletariat of highly educated but low-paid knowledge workers, and also represent their interests in media content.

There is clearly a link between critical media and community media, as both engage Marxist theory. While community media focuses on media produced by regular citizens against capitalism, colonialism and neoliberalism in communities in the Global South, critical media approaches capitalism from a Euro-American perspective, examining media production of the new *precarariat* in the Global North. Therefore who is disempowered and framed as claiming power is somewhat different (the *precarariat* in the Global North vs. the neo-colonized community in the Global South). This analysis is complicated, however, when communities

from the Global South self-represent as part of the diaspora in the Global North in solidarity movements, for example.

Autonomous and Radical Media

Autonomous and radical media share a social anarchist or anti-authoritarian ideological framework. They emphasize the core value of collective autonomy, which is premised upon the notion that the liberation of one person is connected to the liberation of all. Thus autonomous media are collectively organized, and rooted within decentered liberatory social movements emphasizing alternative values and egalitarian practices such as consensus decision making and horizontalism. ‘These values [and practices] include direct democracy, participation, cooperation, collective self-determination, taking action to create change, mutual respect, long-term accountability, and lived social equality, among others. They are crucial to the creation of anarchist media’ (Jeppesen 2012, 265). Moreover, autonomous media are supported by and put into action a political analysis that includes anti-oppression practices of intersectionality theory (Breton et al. 2012b). The collectivity is not defined simply as a postindustrial proletariat, but rather through a multiplicity of interlocking subject-positions.

The quintessential form is the Indymedia network and Independent Media Centres, or IMCs. To understand challenges to media power of the IMC movement, Downing explains Todd May’s Foucauldian formulation of power: ‘his acknowledgement of the micro-circuits of social and cultural power and the necessity to defy them on that level is one that works well in relation to socialist anarchist thought’ (Downing 2003, 250). This re-articulation of Foucault’s notion of power through an anarchist lens allows autonomous media theorists and activists to challenge critiques of the purported ineffectiveness of small-scale media. If micro-circuits of political, social and cultural power can be challenged through micro-circuits of media, then small-scale or nano-media can be crucial to large-scale social movements. Furthermore, Foucault argues that power is everyone, and that power can be productive, therefore theories of empowerment for autonomous media reclaim power through daily organizational enactments of ‘power-with’ the collectivity toward the public good.

‘Defining the source of the problems we face and the nature of the power that maintains them is central to deciding how to address them. The angles of vision of socialist anarchism, historically Marxism’s chief antagonist on the Left, offer a significantly wider view than does conventional Marxism’ (Downing 2001, 13). For Downing, this is because of anarchism’s consideration of the interconnectedness of many liberatory movements. Therefore for autonomous media, productive rather than oppressive power is engaged, both within a horizontally organized collectivity who make decisions together, and through free association with other collectivities who consider how best to organize not just media operations, but all

of society. This ideological position informs both media content and processes or structures.

We need now to add to the concepts already reviewed by exploring in more detail notions of power, hegemony, and resistance... It is naïve to suppose that either culture or communication are anything so innately democratic, although their construction is certainly more emergent than it is presciently organized. In communication and culture, power processes and differentials are everywhere. (Downing 2001, 10)

Downing thus engages Foucault's notion of a web of power that infuses all interactions, and may also be everywhere resisted. Autonomous media producers are attentive to power dynamics within media collectives, and generative of processes to share, diffuse or otherwise call attention to power. Thus the collectivity is framed as staking a claim to horizontal forms of empowerment through autonomous media production. This collectivity challenges media power by disarticulating media from corporate conglomerates and reorganizing it in ways that allow for the practice of empowerment through systemic and structural change.

Conclusion: Toward Alternative Media Power

This article has comparatively analysed four types of alternative media in terms of their theoretical approaches, structures, content and social movement actions, as well as their conceptions of ideology and power. The goal is not to privilege one type over the others, but to understand their specific differences. This is key to developing a more in-depth understanding of the challenges to power offered by engagement with each of these forms, each of which is particularly strong at challenging certain ideological formations or regimes of truth, but also has its limitations.

DIY media challenges dominant media representations, presenting alternative histories and herstories, but is limited by its emphasis on ideologies of individualism in terms of building greater social movements across difference. Community media offers powerful critiques of neoliberal capital from a Third-World Marxist perspective, and as such can lead to profound community change, however links to diverse global struggles might strengthen this approach, without losing the specificity of local media and social issues. Critical media provides a political economy approach to alternative media that considers producers as workers within a global anti-capitalist movement, which might offer serious challenges to neoliberal capital from the EuroAmerican perspective. However, differences among subjectivities in a diverse range of global capitalist societies are sometimes elided, weakening the potential for change. Autonomous media emphasizes process as much as content, paying specific attention to horizontal organizing and

prefigurative politics, as well as introducing intersectional critiques based not just on class but also on gender, sexuality, race and indigenous perspectives, broadening possibilities for change across multiplicities of social movements, however sometimes the emphasis on process can slow down media production, as media activists must learn not just to produce media but also to produce horizontalism in practice, sometimes limiting its reach.

Understanding the distinctions among these forms of alternative media, their theoretical frameworks, and their political commitments allows us to see the depth and breadth of global alternative media production, and to better analyze its effectiveness in not just creating alternative media, but also in challenging media power through sustainable and resilient networks that have the potential to work together across difference to accomplish the profound global social change that is so crucial at this point in history.

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